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THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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## THE CHURCH AFTER GOOGLE

Theology and the Church After Google

Philip Clayton

The Separation of Church and Status: How Online Social Networking Helps and Hurts the Church

Brett McCracken

Gospel Truth in the Age of Google

Rachel Johnson

The Canon After Google: Implications of a Digitized and Destabilized Codex

Ched Spellman

Faith Comes From Hearing: The Scandal of Preaching in a Digital Age

Matt O'Reilly

Virtual World Churches and the Reformed Confessions

Neal Locke

'Thou Hast Given Me a Body': Theological Anthropology and the Virtual Church

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Hacking into the Church Mainframe: A Theological Engagement of the Post-Informational World

Henry Kuo

Theo-Blogging and the Future of Academic Theology: Reflections from the Trenches

David Congdon

Travis McMaken

Theological Blogging: A Contradiction in Terms?

Brian Brock



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# INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Dias

The Internet is the printing press of the twenty-first century—it changes authority structures, democratizes information, and reframes societal expectations. The *Princeton Theological Review*'s fall issue is dedicated to examining church life and gospel proclamation with this phenomenon in mind. What issues should the church consider as it proclaims the gospel in a new technological climate of Google, the iPad, and Facebook? How do such global and local changes affect church ministry? What might they mean for the church's self-presentation and engagement in public life? And at the core, what does it mean for the church to relate and communicate?

This collection of insightful responses thoughtfully reflects upon these questions. The perspectives here provide a way into a discussion that is ever shifting, expanding, changing as both the church and technology encounter newness. The entire conversation between technology and the church is vast—this issue identifies one slice, communication, and explores questions technology prompts the church to consider as well as those the church prompts technology consider. May this issue be a stepping-stone moving the conversation a few feet forward.

In these pages, readers will encounter views along the technology/church spectrum. Philip Clayton and Brett McCracken open this issue with two proposals concerning the church, theology, and technology. Next Rachel Johnson, Ched Spellmen, and Matt O'Reilly offer reflections on the effects of technology on gospel communication, scripture, and preaching. Virtual churches follow, as Neal Locke, Travis Pickell, and Henry Kuo suggest different approaches to embodied faith. To conclude, Travis McMaken, David Congdon, and Brian Brock suggest ways the church may continue to engage technology. All our contributors provoke us to deeper thought, urging us to consider gospel communication with grace and wisdom.

Questions of communication may be some of the first the church examines in relation to new technology. Outstanding issues remain to be explored. Currently, social media are luxuries of higher-income households, and fruitful future conversations could consider this income-disparity and its implications for holistic mission. Additionally, broader technological advances occasion new possibilities in public health, science, and education. Finally, with the addition of this prolegomena, there are two women writing in this issue. This gender gap prompts us to wonder what voices and concerns the current technology discussion promotes or silences, and pushes us to ask why. As the church continues to encounter these changes, it will have a trove of opportunities to delve deeper into technological exploration.



Certainly the church's work goes far beyond technological engagement. If all church knitting committees were to abandon their needles for Twitter feeds, many babies would go without warm blankets. At the same time, if all pastors banned social networking, some communities may fall through the cracks.

A final word of thanks: this issue's prose is remarkably clear. Hats off to our contributors for making their ideas accessible to a public audience.

Enjoy,

—Elizabeth Dias, Co-General Editor



# THEOLOGY AND THE CHURCH AFTER GOOGLE<sup>1</sup>

Philip Clayton

It is difficult to describe how much the audience for systematic theology has changed over the last few decades. In these few pages I'll be arguing that theology needs to change just as radically if it's going to communicate effectively with Gen-Xers, Millennials, and the increasingly large group of non-religious Americans ("non's"<sup>2</sup>) over the coming 10-20 years.

The changes are like the shifting of tectonic plates, which means earthquakes and tsunamis. When I arrived in Munich to study under Wolfhart Pannenberg in the fall of 1981, German theologians still set the tact for Christian theology worldwide. American doctoral programs in theology accepted large numbers of entering students, and most of those students could count on tenure-track jobs when they graduated. Theology journals thrived, and traveling theologians drew large crowds at universities and seminaries. When I asked Pannenberg and other established theologians what was the reason to do abstract academic theology, they invariably appealed to the trickle-down effect: "Our publications influence doctoral students and other academic theologians; their teaching molds the next generation of pastors; and pastors' sermons and ministries guide the thinking and practice of the vast numbers of people who flock to the churches." Or something like that.

You don't have to be a specialist to know that things have changed. A major national survey recently published in *USA Today* shows that 72% of "Millennials"—Americans between the ages of 18 and 29—now consider themselves "spiritual but not religious."<sup>3</sup> Even among those who self-identify as practicing Christians, all of the traditional forms of Christian practice have sharply declined from previous years: church attendance, Bible study, and prayer. Doubts are higher, and affiliation with any institutional church is sharply lower. All of us

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1 Many of these ideas stemmed from the national conference on "Theology After Google" at Claremont School of Theology in March, 2010. The audience and the presenters deserve credit for anything of value that follows. What you can find are videos of the talks, live interviews, and PowerPoint presentations at [www.TransformingTheology.org](http://www.TransformingTheology.org).

2 Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

3 Associated Press, "Survey: 72% of Millennials 'more spiritual than religious'," *USA Today*, October 14, 2010, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-04-27-1Amillfaith27\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-04-27-1Amillfaith27_ST_N.htm).



who are still connected with local congregations already know this pattern, up close and personal. Still, it's sobering to see the trends writ large; after all, we are talking about almost three-quarters of younger Americans!

If the decline of traditional churches and denominations continues, by 2025 the effects will have transformed the American religious landscape—even if not as radically as in Europe. (For example, on a typical Sunday, some 0.5% of Germans attend church.) Some estimate that up to two-thirds of mainline churches may have closed their doors by that time; others will struggle on without a full-time pastor. Denominations will merge in order to be able to maintain even minimal national staffs and programs. A larger and larger proportion of those who still go to church will visit large “mega” churches, those with 2,000 or more attenders on an average Sunday.

I doubt the American interest in spiritual matters will die; people will continue to report that spirituality is extremely important to them. Nor will they pursue these practices in isolation. New forms of association and shared practice will arise; new religious movements will attract participants; alliances across religious traditions will grow in strength and number. Christians who resist these trends will become increasingly strident and increasingly hostile toward the modern world, even as their numbers decrease. And, of course, discussion of religious themes—and what it means to be a Christian in today's world—will grow in intensity and urgency.<sup>4</sup>

And what of theology? In this context, one can no longer view academic theology as a product with an obvious and assured market. Within many churches, the interest in theology appears to be declining; the market base is no longer there. Those who still attend mainline churches are often deeply suspicious of doctrinal theology and more focused on ethical, political, and other practical concerns. By and large, people seem to be more interested in learning about the beliefs of other religious traditions, in debating ethical issues in our culture today, or in pursuing spiritual formation and practices.

You can bemoan the current state of affairs. You can argue that people still need the kind of reflection that systematic theologians offer (a proposition I agree with!), and you can brainstorm ways to get folks to “consume” the theological products that we “produce.” To those who think the problem is just better marketing, I say: I wish you well. If you can rekindle interest in the kind of theology that authors were producing 30 years ago (and that some continue to write), great. The remainder of this piece is dedicated, however, to those who agree with me that such an approach is not necessarily the best, and certainly not the only, way to proceed today.

One brief caveat: To pursue “theology after Google” does not mean to gleefully destroy all traditional Christian beliefs, to abandon the church, or to advocate a post-Christian world view. On the contrary, it does, however, mean

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4 Peter Berger predicted this trend in his prophetic *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York: Free Press, 1992). For an example, see [http://www.religiondispatches.org/dispatches/editorial/2823/conservative\\_christians\\_oppose\\_new\\_%E2%80%98inter-religious%E2%80%99](http://www.religiondispatches.org/dispatches/editorial/2823/conservative_christians_oppose_new_%E2%80%98inter-religious%E2%80%99).



entering in good conscience into a new kind of open and exploratory discourse—a discourse in which one’s conversation partners are not committed in advance to landing where past theologians have landed. Many of them do end up with a vibrant Christian identity, but that’s no longer a pre-condition for theological dialogue. Theology after Google means navigating the treacherous waters of contemporary culture, religion, science, and philosophy—without knowing in advance that the harbor in which one finally drops anchor will be the same theological port from which the ships of old set sail. For those of us who live, work, and think in a Google-shaped world, such certainties about the outcome of the adventure are just not to be had in advance.

# CHURCH IN THE GOOGLE AGE, OR “TOTO, WE’RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE”

Perhaps a few questions will help to evoke the sea change that we face today:

- Why is it that most Americans today don’t walk down to their neighborhood church on Sunday mornings for worship, Sunday school, and a church potluck?
- Although many Christians believe that “everything must change”<sup>5</sup> why is it that the institutions and those who lead them don’t seem to recognize the enormous changes that are already upon us?
- Do we really inhabit two different worlds: those who text, twitter, blog, and get 80% of our information from the internet, and those who are “not comfortable” with the new social media and technologies?
- Could we today be facing a change in how human society is organized that is as revolutionary in its implications as was the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg over 500 years ago?
- If we are, what does all this have to do with theology and the church?

Of course, churches will still exist in the year 2030 (and hopefully long afterwards). But we must not assume that they will look much like church practices from 1955-1995. I assume that Christians will still gather for worship, teaching, and community; that the Scriptures will still be read; that the sacraments will be celebrated. But what church means in practice has always been deeply affected by its age and culture. When these change, so too must the church. Everyone acknowledges that we are living in a time of revolutionary transformation. So shouldn’t we expect that the church is in for some radical changes?

Consider this comparison. On the eastern seaboard in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in the expansion of a young nation westward toward the Pacific Ocean, churches played very specific social functions. They weren’t only the center of religious life, the place where one came to be baptized, married, and buried (“hatched, matched, and dispatched”)... and everything in between. They were also the heart and soul of the community—the center of social, communal, political, and even economic life. There was simply no other game in town. The

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5 Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007).



church stood for the moral values of the community, “what made America great.” When you see the white steeples in a New England town, or when you drive through Midwest towns with a church on every corner, you realize how central a social institution the church once was.

But things have changed. For today’s generation, churches no longer play most of these social functions. We are now a massively pluralistic society living in an increasingly globalized world. Every major world religion is represented among United States citizens. This transformation has massive implications for ecclesiology. Take, for example, the question of authority. In the frontier town, the Southern city, or the New England village there was the authority of the law and the government. Many people were not very educated, so they did not read much, and there was no radio or TV. The pastor of the church was not only the moral and spiritual authority—the representative of the only true religion and its obviously true scriptures—but also probably the most educated person in town. He (almost certainly it was a he) spoke with authority on a wide variety of issues that were important to the society of his day.

Contrast that world with today’s situation. Rarely are pastors approached as figures of authority, except (sometimes!) within their own congregations. Radio, television, and the internet are our primary authorities for the information we need, with newspapers, advertisements, and movies coming in a close second. For many American Christians, Beliefnet.com (“Your Trusted Source for Free Daily Inspiration & Faith”) is a bigger authority on matters of Christian belief and practice than any pastor. We love self-help books, so we are more likely to read *Spirituality for Dummies* than to go to a group Bible study. Forty years ago people were influenced in their judgments about religious matters not only by their pastor but also by the editorials in the religion section of their local newspaper. Today the blogs one chooses to follow are far more likely to influence her beliefs.

#### WHERE’S THE REVOLUTION?

I am almost embarrassed to list these differences, because they are so obvious. But here’s the amazing fact: *Denominations aren’t changing. In most cases they’re not planning for and investing in new forms of church for this brave new world.* (There are some great exceptions.)

This is not a matter of blame. The assignment of the administrators who head up denominations is to run the organization that they’ve been given. I once heard a major national leader say (prophetically) to a group of similar leaders something like, “We all know that the ship is in grave danger, and it may go down. But we all seem to have the attitude, ‘Not on my watch!’”

Pastors have a bit more latitude. Individual pastors and churches are doing amazing things across the U.S. (and outside it); so are para-church and extra-church groups, organizations, and ministries. But in most cases, it’s the denominations that determine how pastors are educated, what kinds of ministries they can engage in, and what kinds of church assignments they get. The training and formation of most pastors takes place in seminary, and seminaries are increasingly out of step



with the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. (As a seminary professor, I get to see this up close and personal.)

Imagine that a pastor has the good fortune to depart seminary with her idealism intact. She's then likely to be assigned to a traditional church that has virtually no youth or younger families present, an average age of 60, and a major budget crisis on its hands. Her orders are, "Keep this church alive!" The church members like the old hymns and liturgies; they don't like tattoos, rock music, or electronics. They are about as likely to read and respond to blogs as I am to play in the Super Bowl. So the young pastor folds her idealism away in a closet and struggles to offer the traditional ministry that churches want.

In short: The majority of our resources continue to be flung at traditional church structures. Those doing the real revolutionary work, those trying to envision—and incarnate—the church of the future struggle on with the barest of resources.

### THEOLOGY AFTER GOOGLE

Progressive and moderate Christian leaders have some vitally important things to say, things that both the church and society desperately need to hear. The trouble is, we tend to deliver our message using technologies that date back to Gutenberg: books, academic articles, sermons, and so forth. (Think of how much of a typical mainline service involves reading written texts.) We aren't making any significant use of the new technologies, social media, and social networking. When it comes to effective communication of message, the Religious Right is running circles around us.

So what does it mean for the up-and-coming theologians and church leaders of the next generation to do "theology after Google"? At the start, it involves conversations with cultural creatives and experts in the new modes of communication. The new theologians know how to listen the "theobloggers" whose use of the new media (blogging, podcasts, YouTube posts) has already earned them large followings and high levels of influence.<sup>6</sup>

"Theology after Google" isn't just about techniques, though—however important they are. It happens only as the next generation of American theologians and church leaders begins to think together about the *implications* of these new modes of communication. Marshall McLuhan's famous "the medium is the message" may not have been completely on the mark; still, what we say *is* affected by how we say it. How are the new media changing the nature of human existence and human social connections? How are they transforming human conceptions of God, Jesus, and Christianity? And what will (and should) the church become as a result? Mastering the new communication technologies is not enough, though it's essential; it's also crucial to understand what it means to be religious, and Christian, in a technology-dominated age.

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6 I recommend regularly spending some time at [HomebrewedChristianity.com](http://HomebrewedChristianity.com) and similar sites.



Some will find the results uncomfortable. It means, first of all, that we can no longer define theology only as an academic discipline. Although *about* Christian beliefs, modern theologies sought primary to meet the standards of the Academy. But the “trickle-down effect”—the idea that the brainy books in academic theology flow through pastors to help congregations and ordinary Christians—is no longer working (if it ever did). By and large academic theologians are not addressing the questions that lay Christians are asking; or they’re answering them so incomprehensibly that only other academic theologians understand them.

Theology after Google devotes itself to the questions that *all* Christians ask and the kinds of answers that ordinary people give, no matter how hesitating and uncertain. This new definition has a wonderful implication: *Theology is tightly bound to whatever and wherever the church is at a given time. Theology is about what the church is and is becoming now.* So “theology after Google” asks: What must the church become in a Google-shaped world?

#### BETA THEOLOGIES FOR A BETA CHURCH

Where is the church today? We face huge challenges with numbers; budget difficulties are a byproduct. Large numbers of younger Americans are staying away. Clergy may be happy about specific successes in ministry, but most are discouraged about long-term trends. And it is hard to bring about change when you serve one or more congregations with no associates, few youth, and scant financial resources.

Protestants are experts at guilt, but it helps to recognize the truth: the reasons for the decline of Christian institutions and congregations are cultural; *they do not just have to do with us.* We are facing a transformation of how human society is organized that is as revolutionary in its implications as was the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg over 500 years ago—perhaps even as revolutionary as the fall of Rome.<sup>7</sup> If that’s right, what does this mean for those who are called to be leaders and to guide the church into the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

What we have to offer—the gospel and the community of the Body of Christ – has not stopped being relevant; Jesus’ promise of comfort in a time of uncertainty is more relevant today than ever before. Stereotypes notwithstanding, most pastors are willing and motivated to try new forms of ministry. But, among all the options, they *are* unsure what to commit to and implement ... and *how* to make it happen.

First, we need to move from “church 1.0” to “church 2.0.” The analogy should be clear. “Web 1.0” was a series of static pages that one would visit and (passively) read. “Web 2.0a”—the web of today—offers a deeply interactive experience, in which the users themselves help to make the places that they go

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7 Phyllis Tickle makes the first point in *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008). Brian McLaren draws the connections with Rome in *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010), and I draw analogies with Augustine’s situation in *Transforming Christian Theology: For Church and Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 43ff.



(facebook, twitter, blogs, wikipedia).<sup>8</sup> We respond, contribute to, and play at the places we visit; we go there *to do things*. (If you're unsure about this, watch a kid playing on the web. My seven-year-old twins will click on anything anywhere on any webpage to see what'll happen and what it will do. The idea that the internet might be about passive reading of content never occurred to them.)

Second, in a time of rapid change, there's no alternative; *you have to experiment*. Perhaps here also we can learn something from software designers. When designers want to try out a new product, they issue a "beta" release. People try it out, find out what works and what doesn't work, and let the designers know. They make some changes and then release the next version. What would it mean for us to consciously adopt "beta church" as a model for ecclesiology and for church ministries?<sup>9</sup>

One of the greatest insights of the Google-World is the freedom of Beta. A Beta is more than a product not-yet-ready-for-consumption, but a way of thinking, creating, and living. It owns being unfinished. It expects contribution, evolution, transparency. For a long time all of culture was under a spell. It believed in the myth of perfection, a closed process of creation, an established finality before completion. Before Beta, a mistake, glitch, virus, or crash was an embarrassment, a failure of the developers. Now these "bugs" are opportunities for learning and we thank people for pointing them out as they join in to improve.

What does Beta talk have to do with the church? Everything. One of the greatest insights that the emerging church movement has shared with the church is this love for the Beta. Think of it as a call for honesty, transparency, innovation, creative participation, and inspired imagination. When we look at the church we think Beta – not because we begrudge what is there, but because we know God is not done, the body of Christ is in the Beta and it is beautiful.

What do you make of this relational vision of the Beta? How far into the life of the church and its public performances does the Beta go? Is our worship in the Beta mode? How about the church structures, or our theology? What about our own life of discipleship and our community? Maybe we could go one step further and say that the entire world is in the Beta? Does Christian theology not point us in this direction?

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8 "The term Web 2.0 is commonly associated with web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing, ... user-centered design, and collaboration.... A Web 2.0 site gives its users the free choice to interact or collaborate with each other in a social media dialogue as creators ('prosumers') of user-generated content in a virtual community, in contrast to websites where users ('consumers') are limited to the passive viewing of content that was created for them. Examples of Web 2.0 include social-networking sites, blogs, wikis, video-sharing sites, hosted services, web applications, mashups..." ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web\\_2.0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0).)

9 The following three paragraphs were written by Tripp Fuller, modified by Spencer Burke, edited again by me, and widely commented on at TheOoze.com. It's an example of *beta writing*, which has no single author and is constantly evolving. Imagine that seminaries would start teaching models for ministry of this sort!



## THE CHURCH AND HER PRACTICES IN THE GOOGLE AGE

The Google age is about men and women who live in, and are molded by, a very different era than the Eisenhower, Civil Rights, Vietnam, and Baby Boomer eras. Those who walk here know the wilderness of unbelief. They are keenly aware that there are other options. They exist in the Matrix of belief and ambiguity. Ambiguities will not be left behind; they *are* the reality. As a result, these men and women exist both “inside” and “outside” the church. It may be that the goal is to find the answers (though many Google-Agers would dispute that). But the means, at any rate, is clear: one must know the questions ... inside and out.

And the church? In my view, the emerging church is not about tearing down all existing structures: church buildings, denominations, and the rest. But it *is* about radical changes around us, and courageous responses within the church. When emergence starts happening around us, in ways and places we didn’t expect, our challenge is to learn to encourage and support it, to learn from it, rather than squelching it. Much has changed: the individuals are different; the communities are different; the ways of talking (and believing) are different. So it’s going to take some stretching on our parts. Theologies from the past won’t work as pre-packaged answers. The Catholic author Richard Rohr captures the shift in his description of spiritual practices:

One great idea of the biblical revelation is that God is manifest in the ordinary, in the actual, in the daily, in the now, in the concrete incarnations of life, and not through purity codes and moral achievement contests, which are seldom achieved anyway... We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking... The most courageous thing we will ever do is to bear humbly the mystery of our own reality.<sup>10</sup>

## THE CHURCH AND HER THEOLOGY AFTER GOOGLE

The quickest way to convey a concrete picture of what this all means is to reduce my message to five theses:

(1) *Theology is not something you consume, but something you produce.* In the Age of Gutenberg, you read theology in a book; you heard it preached in sermons; and you were taught it by Bible teachers. In the Age of Google, theology is what you do when you’re responding to blogs, contributing to a wiki doc or google doc online (or on your own computer), participating in worship, inventing new forms of ministry, or talking about God with your friends in a pub.

(2) *No institutions, and very few persons, function as authorities for theology after Google.* Ever since Jesus’ (often misunderstood) statement about Peter that “on this rock I will build my church” (Mt. 16), the church has had issues with

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10 These quotations have their own life on the web (e.g. [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7919.Richard\\_Rohr](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7919.Richard_Rohr) and <http://twitter.com/donjacobson/status/29245286471>, or just Google them yourself).



authority. The point is too obvious to need examples. The pastor standing up in the pulpit in the early 1960s was still a major authority.

Of course, pastors still stand up in pulpits today, and some still view themselves as indispensable purveyors of truth. But most of us who still speak from pulpits today are having to rethink our relationship with the audiences we address, since most people today shrug their shoulders at those who claim to be authorities in religious matters. (For many of us, scripture continues to be an authority, but the *way* in which it's an authority has changed massively over the last 30 years.) Theology today means what some number of us find plausible about our faith and are willing to share. Today's religious leaders are those who say things that ring true to us, so that we say, "Yeah, I think that person's got some important insights. I'm going to read the blog or find a way to talk with him (or her), and I'm going to recommend to my friends that they do the same."

(3) *Theology after Google is not centralized and localized. Likewise, the church cannot be localized in a single building. We find church wherever we find Jesus-followers that we link up with who are doing cool things.* This point is huge. Denominational officials and many pastors have not even begun to conceive and wrestle with what it means to work for a church without a clear geographical location.

(4) *Similarly, theology after Google does not divide up the world between the "sacred" and the "secular," as past theologies so often did. All thought and experience bears on it, and all of one's life manifests it. Thus the distinction between one's "ministry" and one's "ordinary life" is bogus. All of one's life as a Christian is missional.* The great 15<sup>th</sup>-century theologian and mystic Nicholas of Cusa imagined God as a circle whose radius is infinite and whose center is everywhere. It only takes a second to realize that Cusa's picture wreaks havoc on all geometries of "inside" and "outside."

(5) *The new Christian leader is a host, not an authority who dispenses settled truths, wise words, and the sole path to salvation.* This last point is important enough that it deserves a section of its own.

#### THEOLOGIAN, PASTOR, AND CHURCH LEADERS IN THE GOOGLE AGE

I first really grasped the idea of pastors as hosts in a conversation with Spencer Burke, and it has turned my understanding of Christian leadership upside down. Today, the leaders who influence our faith and action are those who convene (or moderate or enable) the conversations that change our life—or the activities that transform our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our God. It could be an older Christian who convenes discussions at a church, a house, or a pub. It could be Shane Claiborne leading an activity at The Simple Way on Potter Street in Philadelphia—perhaps gardening in the communal garden—that gives you a sense of community that you've rarely had but always longed for. It could be a website or a blogger that you frequently go to, where you read others' responses



and add your own thoughts. Christian leadership is about enabling significant community around the name of Jesus, wherever two or more are gathered in his name.

The new models of emerging leadership in emerging communities deserve a whole article just for themselves. These new leaders are those who discern; they see, state, and honor the spirituality within those they meet – both inside and outside the church. They are “cultural creatives,” able to hear and interpret the pulse of our age. They are scouts for discovering existing communities and hosts for the emergence of new communities. There are the bridgers of conversations. They are lovers of what the church has been and welcomers of what she is becoming.

Above all else, though, they remind me of a great hostess. She makes the guests comfortable; she anticipates their needs. She matches folks up and gets the conversations started, though she doesn’t need to place herself in the middle of each one. She leads by example, often by establishing an atmosphere or an ethos that fosters deep sharing. And, at her best, she transforms the lives of those whom she hosts. I cannot think of a better model for leadership in the church after Google.

Note that a whole new set of spiritual disciplines is implied by (and required for!) this new model of Christian leadership, including the spiritual disciplines of coming alongside (cf. *Parcleto*s, the name for the Holy Spirit in John 14), listening, sitting with hard questions, and thinking (and living) “in the gray.”<sup>11</sup> It is, in short, the spiritual discipline of Hermes: translating the language that nurtured us into the language of those around us. Note also that Hermes did his “ministry” not on Mt. Olympus but in the “secular” spaces of this world, far from the sacred halls.

Although many authors, especially in the emerging church movement, have developed the notion of pastor as host, almost no one has explored what it would mean for *theologians* to understand themselves as hosts. Here’s the idea: Traditionally, the theologian was the “keeper of the faith.” He (I use the pronoun advisedly) was responsible for doctrinal purity; it was his task to make sure that what folks got in sermons and Christian books was “the faith once given.” Of course, there were some interpretive issues that had to be worked out, and the faith had to be applied to the specific challenges of one’s own day and age. Yet this task was held primarily as the trust for a professional class within the church, the pastors and theologians.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Still classically formulated by Paul Tillich in *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1957).

12 It still surprises me to see how little interest there is today in the classic creeds and their traditional interpretations. I suppose it shouldn’t be surprising that more liberal mainline churchgoers would not consider themselves bound by the past conclusions. But one finds less and less interest even among evangelical pastors and church members today. To teach the doctrinal *loci* with the expectation that the members of one’s class will simply write them down, memorize them, and begin believing them is unrealistic. (Not even seminary students are willing to do this!) But one does find an amazing num-



The theologian who wants to participate in and contribute to discussions about faith today has a very different set of job requirements. She certainly is not the lecturer who conveys traditional answers and then sends people off to the examination room. But nor is she expected first to listen patiently as the group does its exploring, and then to close the discussion with her pronouncements on what people should actually think about these questions. (Note, however, that this second role is a vast improvement on the first; would that we had more theologians even willing to go this far!) Instead, her most effective role is as *a convener of and participant in the discussions*.

It obviously requires some significant humbling to take up this new role and to carry it out with enthusiasm, with grace, and in an edifying way. I happen to think that that sort of humbling should lie at the very center of a Christ-shaped ministry. Call it the *kenotic theological method*, one shaped by and around the self-emptying Christological picture of Phil. 2:5-8. Note that many of us who pursue the kenotic theological method today, often with fear and trembling, do so *not* because we think all previous theologies were misguided and because we hope to remake Christianity in our own image. To the contrary! Many of us are convinced that the only way to rekindle interest in core theological questions, to enable the sort of discourse that will help people work their way to something like a Christian world view, is to foster the kind of open discourse that allows them to explore the questions themselves. As the old saying goes, "If you love something, set it free. If it comes back to you, it's yours; if it doesn't, it never was."

But don't underestimate the human ability for self-deception! We often think that we are being fantastic listeners and open to the flow of the discussion, when in fact we are dominating the air waves and holding the reins of the outcome tightly in our hands. It is essential to solicit regular, honest feedback about the role that one is *actually* playing. It is frequently humbling to experience what that feedback actually says. Yet the few times that one succeeds are immensely encouraging.<sup>13</sup>

In the book that Tripp Fuller and I just published, *Transforming Christian Theology*, we argue that theology is about attempting to answer the Seven Core Christian Questions. These questions have impressive-sounding names: the doctrine of God (theology proper), anthropology, soteriology, christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Theologians will recognize the source of these "core questions" in the first systematic theology of the Reformation, Philip Melanchthon's *Loci communes theologici* (1521). But they are really just

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ber of people, many of them outside seminaries and churches, who are interested in the *questions* that the creeds addressed. They want to explore the traditional questions in the context of today's issues, and they want to do it with the freedom to explore, question, reject, and reconstruct.

13 I remember once bumping into one of fourteen students in such an experimental group about a year after our class met. Her words were perhaps the most gratifying I have ever heard from a student: "Oh, weren't you in my class last year?" The fact that she remembered me as a participant and not as the controlling agent was exactly the outcome we were hoping for.



the simple, recurring questions that every Christian wonders about as he or she struggles to be a Jesus disciple: Who is God? What are human beings? How are we separated from God, and how can that separation be overcome? Who is Jesus Christ? What or Who is the Spirit? What is the church, and what should it be doing? And what is our hope for the final future of the cosmos and humanity?

These questions do not have to be discussed in esoteric debates sprinkled liberally with Greek and German technical terms. The most humble attempts to answer these questions, in word and action, are as authentically theology as are the rarified debates within the Ivy Tower—indeed, they may be *more* authentic than what academic theologians do. Call it the Theology of the Widow's Mite. What matters is that the broadest possible range of people is given the opportunity to reflect on, debate, and make up their minds about the questions that are fundamental to Christian self-understanding.

Some people who read the book will come down to the “left” of where I am as a theologian, others to the “right” of me. But those theologians after Google who follow the kenotic methodology don't see it as their primary job description to make sure that everyone lands at precisely the same point of the theological spectrum that the theologian herself inhabits. The ongoing formation of Christian identity in a complex, multi-faceted world—and the individual's decision about that identity—is for us the primary calling.

Can you pursue this kenotic methodology also in your written work? It is fairly obvious that *popular* books, articles, and especially blog posts can utilize this kenotic approach. (In fact, books and articles that do so are generally far more effective and far more widely read than those that follow the old model.) But even in academic writing it is possible to make one's suggestions and proposals in a manner that is guided by the questions, rather than conveying only the certainty that one possesses the answers. I suspect that a survey of publications in theology over the last ten years would show that the most interesting and effective publications were those that worked out of intense and urgent questions rather than out of the guiding framework of a specific set of answers.

#### CONCLUSIONS FOR THE PEOPLE OF THE WAY

Theology after Google is guided by our present context: situation, audience, and social and cultural environment. It cares about the process, the effects, and the usefulness of theology. It is about Jesus, whom we call the Christ, but it is *also* irreducibly autobiographical. The new theologians write theology for the needs of the church today. For us this means: we write theology not just for the comfortable insiders within the churches, but for those who are slowly drifting away—and for those who have moved so far away that it's hard for them to imagine being part of the traditional churches any longer at all. We write with their needs and concerns in mind; we write in language they can understand; and we compose arguments that pay attention to *their* plausibility structures, not just our own.

If we were to write a wiki manifesto for theology after Google, it might read something like this (edits requested!): We find ourselves here, somehow, as followers of Jesus. That part seems to stick and to deepen the longer we live.



We're not sure exactly how we got here; it's almost like it happened *to* us. We call it grace. We find others around us who follow the same Teacher and who therefore struggle with many of the same questions and issues that we face. They help us understand ourselves and to remain faithful to our Guide. We call them church.

But what exactly do we believe? What must we say, and what should we not say (and do)? The quest to know is open-ended. It's filled with uncertainties and indecisions, and it's constantly evolving. That quest *just is* theology. It's everything we think about and do. It's reading the *New York Times* headlines online each morning when we awake. It's the philosophy text that we read in a classroom or the intriguing idea about christology that we talk about with friends over a beer. It's the ethical questions we struggle with. It's our attempts to be involved in authentic forms of ministry and Christian community, *and* the questions we ask about whether those attempts are really faithful and how to make them better. It's that recurring question, "What should I do with my life?"

I can already hear the question from the learned theologian who reads the *Princeton Theological Review*: so is this approach evangelical or conservative? Well, clearly it is a method that would work well for evangelicals, or at least for question-asking evangelicals, because it keeps attention focused on the classic Christian questions, which it calls the "core" questions. It also works well in mainline and progressive communities, because it allows people to voice their questions and concerns and to take a hand in formulating the answers to which they themselves are drawn.

But what I really want to answer is: *That's the wrong question!* The native inhabitants of the Google age, Gen-Xers and Millennials, just aren't so interested in the labels that defined the discourse for the previous generations. Your "-isms" simply don't define the social and cultural spaces that they inhabit. Identities today are more complex, shifting, and uncertain. The implicit essentialism of "isms"-based thinking is foreign to them. So to insist that we define our theological frameworks in terms of preexisting sets of categories—say, exclusively in liberal/evangelical terms (which we know has been the sacred cow of American Christianity for decades), is both misleading and unproductive.

I noted earlier that theology after Google is intrinsically autobiographical. So here is my own take: I believe that the message of Jesus is as relevant and as urgent for today's world as it has ever been. I also find that this message is more accessible in today's context than it was, say, in the comfortable years of the Eisenhower era—years of growth, comfort, and clear self-identities. This is an age of uncertainly, complexity, and unprecedented change. Jesus was not a provider of comfortable answers. He was not a teacher of easy black-and-white distinctions. He was not a prophet who asked his followers to identify with their friends and to vilify the others.

In each of these regards, and in many more, the inhabitants of the Google age may be more attuned to Jesus' message, way of thinking, and way of living, than were many previous ages. In a world increasingly dominated by scientism, capitalism, religious intolerance, and a sense of meaninglessness, this profound message of the kingdom of God is more powerful than ever before. Theology after



Google is far more than merely a new church-growth movement, a new way to package and disseminate the old-style theology. It is instead a radically new way of doing theology, one which (we believe) opens up the power of Jesus' message to today's world in new and exciting ways.

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# THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATUS: HOW ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING HELPS AND HURTS THE CHURCH

Brett McCracken

There are a lot of cultural arenas in which the contemporary Christian church has been inactive, unenthusiastic, or simply ineffective. Technology is not one of them.

Step into an average evangelical church today and one is liable to encounter a high-tech audio/visual experience on par with a rock concert, perhaps with a pastor using an iPad Bible or taking questions from the audience via SMS or Twitter. Or maybe the pastor is actually speaking from a screen, as in the increasingly prevalent multi-site church model or Internet campus phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the Sunday church experience, the evangelical Christian presence in new media spheres is formidable. The Christian blogosphere is thriving, with sites like *Between Two Worlds* (Justin Taylor) and *Jesus Creed* (Scot McKnight) sometimes posting more than a dozen times a day, while group blogs like *GetReligion*, *First Things*, and the *Gospel Coalition* curate a broad assortment of Christian writers, journalists and thought leaders to feed a steady stream of faith-oriented news, theology, and prognosticating to increasingly broad and avid readerships.

Evangelicals—particularly pastors and authors/bloggers/speakers—have also been early Twitter adopters, and now arguably constitute one of the most thriving subcultures in the Twitterverse. Pastor Rick Warren, for example, has more than 152,000 followers on Twitter. Evangelicals have also embraced new media communication platforms like YouTube video and iTunes podcast audio, in many cases with great success. Pastors like Mark Driscoll at Seattle's Mars Hill Church and Matt Chandler at Dallas' Village Church routinely rank among iTunes top podcast downloads.

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<sup>1</sup> Churches like Oklahoma's LifeChurch.TV, New Jersey's Liquid Church and Nevada's Central Christian Church are examples of multi-site churches with multiple physical locations as well as an "Internet campus" where anyone in the world with an Internet connection can take part in worship.



Christians have, in large part, embraced technology and mastered its numerous applications and efficiencies. Perhaps because the outward-focused, spread-the-Gospel mission of the church fits so nicely with the world-flattening, mass communication potential of new media technology, the marriage has been rather seamless.

Doubtless, much good has come of it. The global availability of Christian resources via the Internet—sermons, blog discourse, pastoral training, networking—holds exciting promise for an increased unity among the worldwide church. Technologies like Skype and iChat have revolutionized the way missionaries abroad can communicate with family and supporters back home. Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites allow for more regular communication, updates and community-building between church leaders and their flocks, and a broader sense of connectedness between previously localized communities of believers.

Much more could be written about the many ways in which technology has benefitted the church. No assessment of this subject matter would be valid that did not admit from the outset that indeed, technology can and will do great things for Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But this essay is not primarily about those things.

Throughout history, technology has never been value-neutral. There are almost always both good and bad things—frequently unintended on both accounts—about new media or technological advances. We must recognize that both benefits and burdens inhere in every technology, apart from the content it delivers.<sup>2</sup> As Marshall “The Medium is the Message” McLuhan famously said, “All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered.”<sup>3</sup>

We may certainly debate whether or not McLuhan’s pseudo-technological determinism is an overestimation. But given the fact that the western, modernist perspective on technology has largely been defined by a Jetsons-esque utopian ideal—“the idea that technological innovation is *synonymous* with moral, social, and psychic progress” as Neil Postman suggests<sup>4</sup>—we are perhaps better aided by a gut-check critique that takes a step back from the wonders of technology and asks questions about how they might be negatively impacting us.

This article seeks to highlight some of the unintended consequences of the church’s embrace of recent social media communication technologies, not in effort to dismiss outright the usage of such technologies, but simply to raise a few warning flags so that we might think critically about how we can cautiously utilize such things while recognizing their limitations and downsides.

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2 Robert H. Woods and Paul D. Patton, *Prophetically Incorrect: A Christian Introduction to Media Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), xxxvi.

3 Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is The Massage* (San Francisco: Hardwired, 1967), 26.

4 Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 41.

## THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In July 2010, social networking colossus Facebook surpassed 500 million users, an impressive feat accomplished in just six short years of existence. But even while the number of users grew to be as large as twice the population of America, the beginnings of a Facebook backlash began to be seen. An outrage erupted in April over privacy concerns, and in the latter part of 2010, two films, *Catfish* and *The Social Network*, asked critical questions about “The Facebook” (as it was originally called). The former film, a documentary directed by Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, raised questions about online identity and how much we should trust the things our Facebook “friends” say or present about themselves. The latter film, a dramatization of the founding of Facebook as visualized by cinematic auteur David Fincher, presents Facebook as essentially a superficial outlet to flaunt social status. In spite of the many criticisms that are being leveled at Facebook, more and more people (especially older users, parents, and grandparents<sup>5</sup>) are getting on the social networking bandwagon, as are institutions, organizations, companies and, yes, churches. For many, Facebook is an unprecedented resource with limitless potentials for communication, and the argument for participation on Facebook seems to be a slam dunk.

Many churches are active on Facebook for a myriad of reasons. It offers an easy, free way to communicate with congregations and the community; it provides a place to share photos, videos and presentational materials from the church; it can be a great “connection point” location where people can invite others to church, staff can be visible and interact with the congregation, and word can spread quickly about news, prayer requests, and so forth.<sup>6</sup>

Some writers, such as Lenora Rand in her *Christian Century* piece, “The Church on Facebook,” suggest that social media sites like Facebook are useful in ministry beyond just information transmission, because they “may actually present a new way of being the church.”<sup>7</sup> Rand points out that, in some ways, Facebook has filled a social void that the church used to fill. At any given moment in its status update feed, Facebook provides users with “tidbits of honesty, introspection and vulnerability, confessions of hurt, need and sin.”<sup>8</sup> She notes that because Facebook has become the new social commons—the site where people go to know and be known—churches should embrace this platform or else be abandoned and deemed irrelevant.

Experimental psychologist Richard Beck, who teaches at Abilene Christian University, agrees with Rand that Facebook has in many ways replaced the

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5 Ki Mae Heussner, “Is Facebook Aging Gracefully?” *ABCNews.com*, July 10, 2009, accessed September 25, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/AheadoftheCurve/story?id=8044711&page=1>.

6 These and other ideas are listed in pastor Frank Chiapperino’s blog entry, “10 Reasons Your Church Should Be On Facebook,” August 16, 2009, <http://frankchiapperino.com/2009/08/16/10-reasons-your-church-should-be-on-facebook/>.

7 Lenora Rand, “The Church on Facebook,” *Christian Century*, June 30, 2009, 22.

8 *Ibid.*, 23.



social-networking function of church. In his article “How Facebook Killed the Church,” Beck proposes that Facebook is a contributing reason for Millennials losing interest in regular church attendance. “Mobile social computing,” writes Beck, “has replaced the main draw of the traditional church: Social connection and affiliation...”

Church has always been about social affiliation. You met your friends, discussed your week, talked football, shared information about good schools, talked local politics, got the scoop, and made social plans... But Millennials are in a different social situation. They don’t need physical locations for social affiliation... Already connected Millennials have the luxury to kick the church to the curb. This is the position of strength that other generations did not have. We fussed about the church but, at the end of the day, you went to stay connected. For us, church *was* Facebook!<sup>9</sup>

Facebook is not the only popular social media platform churches are increasingly using to enhance their ministry efforts. A growing number of churches are incorporating Twitter into their services—churches like New York City’s Trinity Church, which once tweeted the Passion play in 140-character bursts on Good Friday, or Charlotte’s Next Level Church, whose pastor Todd Hahn prefaced his Easter Sunday sermon in 2009 by saying, “I hope many of you are tweeting this morning about your experience with God.”<sup>10</sup> Many pastors see Twitter as a useful tool for building community and incorporating interaction in services, as well as providing a quick and easy mechanism for information distribution, advertising and potentially viral marketing.

Another social networking technology being utilized by churches is the recently exploding location-based platform Foursquare. Utilizing smart phone GPS technology to publicize one’s location to a network of friends (sometimes linked in to Twitter or Facebook), Foursquare allows pastors and members of churches to enhance the “what am I doing” real time connectedness of Twitter with a “where am I?” location component.

In a recent blog post, David Tonen, a leader at LifeBridge Community Church in Halifax, Nova Scotia, wrote, Foursquare “enhanced spiritual mentorship opportunities, built stronger relationships, and ultimately enhanced my ministry.” By getting glimpses into the favorite restaurants, coffee shops, and retail stores of his friends in church, Tonen found that Foursquare deepened his already existing

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9 Richard Beck, “How Facebook Killed the Church,” *Experimental Theology*, March 5, 2010, accessed September 29, 2010, <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2010/03/how-facebook-killed-church.html>.

10 Bonnie Rochman, “Twittering in Church, with the Pastor’s O.K.” *Time*, May 3, 2009, accessed September 26, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1895463,00.html>.

network. Seeing that a friend was entering a hospital at one moment also allowed for “real-time ministry opportunity to genuinely care for someone who needed to be encouraged spiritually and physically.”<sup>11</sup>

It seems that for many Christians working in ministry, every new social media technology is a new mode of communication to leverage, a new tool of connectivity and networking through which relationships can be deepened and the kingdom expanded. Many of the apologists for the church’s usage of social media suggest that the best reason to leverage things like Facebook and Twitter for ministry is the acknowledgment that Christianity has always been about social networking.

“Jesus was the social medium God used to influence the world,” said Ariel Vergez and Dominic DeMaria in their presentation, “Jesus in Social Media,” a seminar presented by L.A.’s Oasis Church as part of the 2010 Social Media Week. “Jesus knew how to attract followers... he knew that grassroots marketing was the best way to go viral,” they added. Later they suggested that Foursquare’s business model is “essentially the same” as that of Jesus: “Generate as big a user base as possible and sell national brands and local merchants on the possibilities of marketing to people as they congregate, ready to eat, to shop or to spend.”<sup>12</sup>

In his recent book, *Thy Kingdom Connected: What the Church Can Learn from Facebook, the Internet, and Other Networks*, Dwight Friesen agrees that social media technologies are simply reinforcing structures and values that have always defined Christianity. Friesen suggests that social networking platforms like Facebook are helping the church to see the interconnectedness of all things, that “the kingdom of God has always been a networked reality.”<sup>13</sup>

Within this nodal, interconnected, “networked paradigm,” the maxim “links are relationships” reigns supreme, reinforcing the centrality of connectivity for Christ’s church on earth. “The church exists in relationship, by relationship, and for relationship,” writes Friesen. “We exist to connect people with God, one another, and with creation in continuity with the capacious narrative of Scripture.”<sup>14</sup>

But is online social networking really so neatly contiguous with the traditions and values that have defined Christianity? Are “links” and “relationships” really synonymous? How is social media actually shaping the way we think about relationships and “community,” and what are some of the unintended consequences of these technologies that should perhaps give the church pause before it rushes to jump on another social media bandwagon?

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11 David Tonen, “Friday Four: Foursquare,” *MediaSalt*, July 16, 2010, accessed September 29, 2010, <http://www.mediasalt.com/2010/07/16/friday-four-foursquare/>.

12 Ariel Vergez and Dominic DeMaria, “Jesus in Social Media,” (lecture, Oasis Church, September 20, 2010).

13 Dwight J. Friesen, *Thy Kingdom Connected: What the Church Can Learn from Facebook, the Internet, and Other Networks* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 172.

14 *Ibid.*, 109.



## THE PARADOX OF PUBLIC INTIMACY

In her *Christian Century* article, Lenora Rand argues that “Facebook allows us to remain intimate and honest, to know each other and be known by each other, even if that isn’t happening in the bricks-and-mortar world.”<sup>15</sup>

There are many things to question in that statement, but perhaps the most audacious claim is that Facebook is somehow a boon to intimate communication, allowing people to be true, open, and *known* by one another in ways potentially superior to that of the physical world.

Facebook and Twitter are, above all, forums of public communication. Whereas in former eras we might never know who all of our friends’ friends were, where our pastors were, or what conversations our cousins or sisters or bosses were having (and with whom) in real time, all of that is now the norm on social networking sites. Private conversations are now out in the open, displayed on “walls” and Twitter profiles for all to see, and we actually prefer it that way.

Analogous to the now regular, but terribly annoying, cultural habit of loudly engaging in a phone conversation on subways, in elevators, or pretty much anywhere for all to hear, this online relational exhibitionism favors public bursts of communication over private email messaging, just as the cell phone rendered the privacy of the phone booth moot in the onward march to mobile telephony.

In the world of Facebook, our “friends” are almost destined to become collectible commodities and status symbols, things we collect to adorn the “walls” of our own online environs. We strategically “friend” people on Facebook or “follow” them on Twitter, and then we post things on their wall or tag them in a post to publicly consummate the relationship.

Twitter is built on the notion of public conversation. The process of gaining followers—the ultimate purpose and goal on Twitter—is aided by the “reply” system, where you tag another user with the @ symbol in your “tweets” of 140 characters or less. Each time you engage with another @user, the conversation, often comprised of two or three messages back and forth, is made public and an association is cemented.

As with Facebook, the whole culture of Twitter revolves around and is sustained by public relationships and a type of communication that is between individuals but observable by vast numbers of people. We love Facebook because we can spy on acquaintances and research who they communicate with regularly, and in what manner. We love it because if we want to “be seen” talking to someone, perhaps to make a point to someone else, it’s as easy as a quick wall post.

What else can this be but a performance, an exercise of power wherein which we can regulate and micromanage our very specifically staged social spheres? If this is really about relationship-oriented communication founded on intimacy, then we would just email people privately. If our “friends” were really important relationships to us, we would spend time with them in person or on the phone, and we would not care that the public was privy to the fact that we were in a relationship. This is one of the problems with social networking in

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15 Rand, 23.

general. It cheapens the very idea of “relationship” by making it a public and oftentimes *performative* act. It can sometimes make friendship a mercenary act, a utilitarian activity akin to “knowing the right people” to gain traction or respect in an upwardly mobile profession.

Social networking also cheapens relationships because it removes intimacy and puts all our “friends” onto the same plane. We disclose rather significant things about ourselves (“We’re engaged! Having a baby! Mourning the death of...”) with the entire collective rather than to any sort of “inner circle.” I have heard more than one person tell me how disappointing and almost betraying it felt to hear “major” news about one of their close friends broken to them via Facebook where hundreds of others also heard it for the first time.

Pastor and technology critic Shane Hips captures this tension well in his book, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*:

Intimacy happens the moment we are invited into the exclusive VIP room of another person’s life. Intimacy always follows the statement, “I’m going to tell you something I’ve never told anyone before.” These are risky words of deep trust and vulnerability. The exclusivity of personal information creates the conditions of intimacy. That intimacy is preserved in that relationship as long as the information remains exclusive. The moment it is available to anyone and everyone is the moment intimacy begins to evaporate.<sup>16</sup>

If Christian pastors and churches are truly hoping to leverage social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter to “build community,” one hopes they are thinking seriously about what sort of community it is they are cultivating. Sure, Facebook might make it easier to keep tabs on large numbers of peoples’ lives, but is “keeping tabs” really a relationship? Facebook creates the illusion that by being constantly in touch with a person, you can know them more; that by accepting a “friend request,” you have made a real life, human connection. But have you? Facebook allows us to have a broad network of “contacts,” but how intimate are “contacts?”

As Christians, if we truly believe that each human is a precious being—that, as C.S. Lewis put it, “there is no mere mortal... Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses”<sup>17</sup>—then shouldn’t we be seeking to *truly* know others rather than to simply “keep tabs on” them through short updates, photo albums, and wall posts?

#### BEING KNOWN AND BEING PRESENT

The “keeping tabs on” worlds of Facebook, Twitter, and Foursquare creates something information architect Leisa Reichelt calls “ambient intimacy,” that is,

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16 Shane Hips, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 113.

17 C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 40.



the ability “to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that you wouldn’t usually have access to, because time and space conspire to make it impossible.”<sup>18</sup> Reichelt sees value in the “ongoing noise” of social media’s “ambient intimacy”:

It helps us get to know people who would otherwise be just acquaintances. It makes us feel closer to people we care for but in whose lives we’re not able to participate as closely as we’d like. Knowing these details creates intimacy. (It also saves a lot of time when you finally do get to catch-up with these people in real life!) It’s not so much about meaning, it’s just about being in touch.<sup>19</sup>

Reischelt and other theorists of social media point out that short-burst social networking communication often serves the *phatic* communication function, akin to saying “What’s up?” to a friend in the hall at school, not because you want to know what’s up but simply because you want to stay in contact. Social networking certainly serves this function of reinforcing the fact of a relationship (on some level) and the maintenance of it through regular tweets and updates.

But does this sort of communication really establish intimacy or strengthen bonds? In a world where one out-of-the-blue update or tweet appears on the feeds of hundreds of people simultaneously, are discrete relationships really being nurtured?

In a *New Yorker* piece on Twitter activism, cultural critic Malcolm Gladwell argues that social media platforms are built around weak ties:

Twitter is a way of following (or being followed by) people you may never have met. Facebook is a tool for efficiently managing your acquaintances, for keeping up with the people you would not otherwise be able to stay in touch with. That’s why you can have a thousand “friends” on Facebook, as you never could in real life.<sup>20</sup>

The question for churches seeking to establish community and strengthen relationships through these platforms is simply: Are people really *known* on Facebook? How important is physical presence in the establishment of intimacy?

“The Internet is seen as the Holy Grail of ‘building community,’” writes Hipps in *Flickering Pixels*. But he cautions that “digital social networking inoculates people against the desire to be *physically present* with others in real social networks—networks like a church or a meal at someone’s home. Being together becomes nice but nonessential.”<sup>21</sup>

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18 Leisa Reichelt, “Ambient Intimacy,” *Disambiguity*, March 1, 2007, accessed September 25, 2010, <http://www.disambiguity.com/ambient-intimacy/>.

19 Ibid.

20 Malcolm Gladwell, “Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not be Tweeted,” *The New Yorker*, October 4, 2010, accessed October 4, 2010, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa\\_fact\\_gladwell](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell).

21 Hipps, *Flickering Pixels*, 115.

What are we missing when online social networking “friendship” becomes the norm for interacting with people? The social media world give us a new conception of “knowing” and “being known” that consists in things like highly constructed “profile pages,” full of strategically listed “likes” of favorite movies, music, and brands, status updates of day-to-day activities, public pronouncements, endorsements, and comments about the weather. But aren’t human beings more complicated than their status updates and “ingredient listing” profile pages? The tightly controlled space of social media rules out the unsafe, slightly awkward but wonderfully unpredictable physical encounters wherein which the nuances and nonverbals of human connection play out.

What happened to discovering things about people by asking them in person, hearing from them, wondering about idiosyncratic mysteries, or encountering little discoveries along the way? What about the value in seeing the dissonance between someone’s facial expression or body language and what they are saying? When we all have control over what we look like and how we define ourselves on the Internet, it removes that mystery. Furthermore, it turns “friendship” into something that has less to do with knowing people deeply and more to do with knowing whatever bits and pieces of them they want to reveal.

#### THE TWO SIDES OF EFFICIENCY

Of course, it is not really possible to achieve intimacy with every person we know. There is not enough room or time in anyone’s life to have truly deep, intimate relationships with more than a select group of people. In the language of Martin Buber, we could say that we only have room in life for a few of the truly profound, intimate “I & Thou” relationships, while most of our relationships are of the “I & It” variety.<sup>22</sup> Facebook is attractive because it promises an “I & You” encounter for the low price of an “I & It” relationship, notes Friesen in *Thy Kingdom Connected*. “All a person has to do to become your ‘friend’ is to send a quick request and then wait for your confirmation,” he notes, but, “before you beat yourself up for *It’ing* a relationship, it is impossible for people to have genuine *I & You* encounters with everyone all of the time.”<sup>23</sup> For those you do not wish to invest tons of your time in, social networking technologies are indeed an efficient option for staying connected.

Certainly the argument from efficiency is a strong one. No one can dispute the fact that social media allows for cheap, easy, real-time communication to vast numbers of people. Facebook makes it easy to get news out to vast social networks such as church groups. Twitter allows Christians to more readily keep tabs on their congregation’s daily life. Smart phones make it easier to schedule prayer breakfasts and Starbucks devotional meetings.

But easier is not necessarily better. Are these technologies making things too painless, too quick, too easy? The culture of social media thrives on the

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22 See Martin Buber, *I & Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1970).

23 Friesen, 51.



instantaneous. It encourages “on-the-go” communication. It beckons you to have a thought and share it with the world. But it is not necessarily an environment conducive to patient reflection and deliberate consideration.

“The problem is speed,” notes Shane Higgs of the culture of social media. “It demands such rapid creation of ideas that you aren’t allowed the blood sweat and tears and wrestling that a Pope must do, or the decades of solitude that a mystic might do.”<sup>24</sup> Higgs thinks that these technologies can inhibit spiritual growth, which requires the capacity to be “fully present,” both physically present in space and mentally present in time. When Jesus said, “do not worry about tomorrow,” it was another way of saying “be present,” suggests Higgs. The digital age, however disembodies us and preoccupies us with efficiency,” adds Higgs. “You are trying to defeat and conquer time. There’s a preoccupation with the future and the past, and an ignoring of the present moment.”

The church on Facebook and Twitter must confront the underbelly of efficiency. It conditions us to devalue things like “down time,” “in between time,” and “waiting.” With smartphones in our pockets and the ability to Google anything, tweet or text anyone from wherever we are, the notion of sitting still and just *being* or just *considering* is increasingly lost. The beauty of boredom grows ever dimmer in the age of apps and multi-tasking. The “instant feedback” culture of social media also promotes a short-attention span impatience. We post something on Facebook and then check back multiple times that hour to see who comments on it. We check our Twitter pages hourly to see who has responded to a tweet. We send a text and expect an immediate response.

Not only does this “nowness” cultivate narcissism, but it also affects us psychologically, notes Doreen Dodgen-Magee, a licensed psychologist who specializes in working with parents and child-connected professionals about the neurological, relational, and intrapersonal impact of overuse of technology. Dodgen-Magee notes that these technologies are making us more dependent on external affirmation for a sense of the self, as well as damaging our ability to thrive on our own and self-soothe when things are tough. When we can go to a chatroom or find “connection” on Facebook at any moment to make us feel better or talk us out of something, we start to lose the ability to rely on ourselves. For Dodgen-Magee, the overarching concern is that we are increasingly unable to delay gratification in the age of instantaneous feedback: “Even in very small ways, we are not developing the ability to wait, and I think that impacts our relationships with our selves, and it can be devastating on our relationship with God, because we become unwilling to wait on him.”<sup>25</sup>

The mentality of high-speed social media facilitates a sort of drive-by relationship maintenance and hit-and-run identity expression, but does it help us to consider things and know both God and ourselves more deeply?

At the end of the day, these “have a thought and share it with the world” technologies erode our inner thought lives. It is hard to keep anything to ourselves

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24 Quotes in this paragraph are transcribed from a personal interview with Shane Higgs and the author on September 22, 2010.

25 “How is Technology Shaping Generation Y?” *Biola Magazine*, Fall 2010, 27.

and be reflective just for ourselves because we have become used to the notion that anything worth saying can and should be shared with the digital community in real time. When we sit alone and contemplate something that is not meant to be shared with the whole wide world, we almost do not know what to do with ourselves.

Especially for younger generations, our identities are increasingly tied to social networking posturing, notes Todd Hall, professor of psychology at Biola University and editor of the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. “Older generations tend to view social networking technologies as functional tools, not as a way to define their identity,” Hall says. “But for the younger generations, social networking shapes their identity, and I think it makes it harder for them to be alone with God when they get used to this sort of constant interaction and ‘community.’”<sup>26</sup>

Though churches may find plenty of usefulness and efficiency in social networking technologies, they should consider the unintentional side effects of the “efficiency mentality” on spiritual practices like prayer and Bible reading. As we grow accustomed to the dynamic, instant-feedback, noisy ambience of social media, it is not surprising that praying privately, silently, and alone to an unresponsive God becomes a difficult endeavor. It is no wonder that reading the Bible (or any book for that matter) in private for an extended period of time feels increasingly isolating and hard to sit through. In a world where communication and identity are increasingly defined by their efficiency, rapidity, and fluidity, the church should be a place where we can slow down and dwell on unchanging truths and the infinitely mysterious presence of God, right?

#### IS SOCIAL NETWORKING ABOUT ME OR WE?

Some would suggest that one of the values in the church embracing the networked paradigm of social media technology is that it allows for a broader, more diverse connectedness. It allows the connecting pockets and nodes of local church communities to be bound together across great distances. In this situation, the church becomes decentralized and flattened, a community of equals in which authority comes not from individuals but from the collective. It is the Wikipedia model of cooperative truth-telling and collective intelligence—the notion that a self-correcting network will over time become a more reliable source than any one person or institution, regardless of resources.

Dwight Friesen is one such champion of this notion. He suggests that in the networked paradigm, authority for ministry does not flow from people with titles or from faith communities or even from continuity with one’s historic Christian tradition. Rather, from a networked perspective, “Authority resides in the mission of the network... As such, authoritative action is not judged by edict but by furthering the mission of the living system. Authority revealed, not held.

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26 Quoted in Brett McCracken, “Short Attention Span Faith,” *Relevant*, September/October 2009, 85.



Networked authority is proven to be authentic by the realization of the missional identity of the network.”<sup>27</sup>

But here we must ask questions about where exactly this “missional identity of the network” is defined. Does it just spring forth naturally, with no direction from tradition or authority? And if authority comes not by edict but by the organic revelation of “the living system” in action, are we to assume that the mission of the network is uniform in every instance? Surely it is not the case that every Christian network on Facebook or Twitter is of the same mind or mission, exercising a collective and undisputed will. Take one look at the Christian Twitterverse and you will see that the same niches, cliques, and denominational boundaries exist here as they do in the physical world. Whatever authority social networks wield, it seems more likely to be an extension of the structures already existing rather than a newly unified, revolutionary sort of ecumenical authority.

Furthermore, is the hierarchy-free, decentralized nature of social networks really reflective of the nature of the church? As Malcolm Gladwell notes, networks that are free of a single central authority are “enormously resilient and adaptable in low-risk situations.” One example would be Wikipedia, where the “anyone can say anything about anything” approach works because falsehoods are eventually corrected by the community. But as Gladwell notes, these networks “have real difficulty reaching consensus and setting goals. They can’t think strategically; they are chronically prone to conflict and error. How do you make difficult choices about tactics or strategy or philosophical direction when everyone has an equal say?”<sup>28</sup>

In the world of social networking, we are bombarded with ideas and interjections, opinions and feelings, blips and bursts of raw subjectivity in a steady stream of fragmentary flow. This is all well and good if what we seek is a mere “ambient intimacy” or general awareness of who we know, where they are, and what they have done today. But it does not seem like a structure well fit for collective action or unified purpose, which in the case of the church seems to require some sort of authoritative hierarchy and “philosophical direction.” The social networking world is rather more like a chorus of confession than a singularly focused missional movement. It seems much more to be about inward validation than outward charity and humility.

Certainly social media has its purposes for the efficient sharing of content, spreading of valuable information, and promoting of good things. But more often than not, it seems mostly to be about hearing yourself speak and seeing what others have to say about you. Social media and its pressing questions (“how many Facebook friends or Twitter followers do I have?”) create the impression that the world should always be watching, and thus we should always be performing. “Who am I?” gets subsumed in the question, “What comes up if I Google myself?”

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27 Friesen, 115.

28 Gladwell, “Small Change.”

On the whole, social media seems more prone to foster pride and narcissism than to inspire an awareness of the other, a unified front of Christ-like service, or a deeply entrenched community.

This is not to say that it is impossible. None of the critiques in this article are intended to dissuade Christians or churches from having any part of social networking. There are certainly many ways in which social media can be an asset for ministry. But the gospel, it seems to me, is first and foremost an embodied thing that requires sacrificial awkwardness rather than low-cost, anonymous efficiency. Certainly there are ways to embody the gospel in the digital world. It will, however, take a concerted effort to be humble, other-focused, and vulnerable rather than artificially micro-managed and self-conscious. It will involve cultivating meaningful offline connections that stem from our online “contacts.” It will require a genuine effort to *know* people for the holy beings that they are, rather than simply to accumulate “friends” for the status or contact cachet they may bring.

Whatever else the church does to “leverage” these new social networking technologies, she should always remember that no technology is neutral or free of unintended consequences. The church of social media is doubtless both a step forward and a step back, and it is up to us and our critical faculties to ponder where the path veers from here.

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# GOSPEL TRUTH IN THE AGE OF GOOGLE

Rachel Johnson

*“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free” (John 8:32)*

“What is truth?” Pilate scoffed. Two thousand years later, still that question rings in our ears. It is the question with which the church must wrestle and strive to answer as best it can on this earth. It is in the face of this question that the church is called to proclaim the liberating Gospel of Christ. But how do we witness to this ancient message in a post-Google world? How do we give life to the traditions that have been handed down to us in the age of Twitter and Facebook?

The post-Google world presents a number of challenges to the call of the church to proclaim truth. Much word processor ink has been spilled over how churches should engage people of the technological revolution, what marketing techniques they can use, and which new media best reach which demographics. While examining how the church can best use these new tools is important, there is a more crucial question we must ask: how are those tools impacting our ability to live out our call in the world? We live in an age where lies can spread from BlackBerries to Facebook in the click of a track ball and anyone can follow three easy steps to set up a blog from which they spout their version of reality. In a time when information is readily available to all, truth is becoming harder to unveil. If the church is to have any hope of living into its call to proclaim the truth, these are the realities we must confront.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SPEAK TRUTH IN A WORLD  
WHERE LIES SO EASILY BECOME REALITY?

While the advent of Google democratized information in profound and wonderful ways, it also opened new avenues for anyone to sow seeds of deceit. In the age of the 24-hour news cycle and a blogosphere that never sleeps, that which is true all too often gets sacrificed to that which is expedient. Comedian and satirical prophet Steven Colbert—who famously coined the word “truthiness”—humorously demonstrated the power of the internet to spread falsehood when he took on the information giant Wikipedia. Introducing the concept “wikiality”—as opposed to reality—Colbert asserted that anything can be true if enough people believe it is (metaphysical nominalism to the extreme). He then challenged his audience to go to Wikipedia and edit the entry on elephants to state that the elephant population in Africa had tripled in six months. Devoted fans immediately obeyed and suddenly a resource that millions turn to for information on any number of



topics reflected “facts” that were untrue. Colbert’s stunt was exactly that, a stunt. And while there may be a few unfortunate people who are now gravely concerned with the growing elephant population, the gimmick was largely harmless. In too many instances, however, the power of a few to alter “reality” for many is not. In the post-Google world, lies told in one corner of cyberspace have the power to alter an entire nation’s public discourse.

In August 2010, a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center revealed that nearly 1 in 5 Americans incorrectly believe that President Barack Obama is a Muslim. Only a third of the population was able to correctly identify his faith as Christianity, while 43% did not know the President’s religion at all. The number of people who believe the President is a Muslim has increased from 11% in March 2009 up to 18%. This is despite the numerous occasions in which the President has spoken very openly about his conversion to Christianity and the impact of his faith on his daily life. While there are many theories to explain this increase, what is undeniable is that these numbers are the result of persistent whisper campaigns, internet rumors, and outright lies only half-heartedly challenged on network news. In a post-Google world, all it takes is for one internet story to be picked up by one unscrupulous public personality. Then like wildfire, innuendo and falsehood spread from blog to Facebook to Twitter to email to radio to TV back to blog, and immediately fiction is given an air of legitimacy.

It is not only the President’s faith that has been subject to this level of deliberate misrepresentation. During the national debate over healthcare reform, prominent political leaders repeatedly and unashamedly bore false witness by saying that the bill would create “death panels” and provide for federal funding of abortions. As a result, in September 2009 41% of the country incorrectly believed healthcare reform would institute government panels that would determine whether the elderly received medical care. On the issue of climate change, for years scientific research has been ridiculed as hocus pocus and reasonable concerns derided as histrionics. Any legitimate debate over how best to assess and address the problems we face is stymied when anyone can brush aside facts and create a new reality that better suits their ideological or political ends. After all, why do we need to worry about the extinction of elephants when their population in Africa tripled in six months?

To be sure, the problem of deliberate misrepresentation and deceit is one our entire society faces, but it presents particular challenges to a body that claims to be the source of truth on earth and a people who are called to witness to it. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed, “Woe unto those who call evil good and good evil” (Isa. 5:20). It is easy to believe that in our modern age he would add, “Woe unto those who call lie fact and fact lie.” Christians should be the first to call for honesty in our public discourse and hold all our leaders accountable to the standard of integrity and truthfulness. The book of James states that the tongue can be like a small fire that sets a whole forest ablaze. When we allow spin to distort truth and ends to justify means our society becomes morally bankrupt. There are enough

honest disagreements over the best policies to benefit our nation and world without the construction of false debates that have been manufactured simply to sow division and increase ratings.

Christians have a duty to be upright and moral in our conduct, to have our “yes” be “yes” and our “no” be “no.” But there is another reason we must be concerned about the ability of the few to alter reality for the many. Unless we challenge head on a culture that makes truth a relative term, we cannot faithfully witness to the Gospel of Christ. It is not enough for us to only serve in soup kitchens and shelters, to dig wells and build homes because lies are like a small fire; while we are building homes, they are setting entire villages ablaze and real lives are impacted. Our culture of deceit meets us in the very places the church is called to serve. When a congregation of 50 can gain international attention by claiming that burning the Qur’an is a faithful expression of Christianity, human lives are endangered and the Christian witness is harmed. When citizens are motivated to make political decisions out of fear and hate, it is the poor and vulnerable who suffer. When reality becomes so distorted that lies appear facts and evil seems good, we have all lost our way. Words are not just words. Unless we directly confront falsehood in our public and private lives it threatens to undermine the church’s entire mission to proclaim Christ in word and deed.

So what is the church to do? The first step is to be honest to ourselves, to not be conformed to this new age in which we live, but to transform it. In the age of Google, it is impossible to stop those bent on deceit and destruction from spreading their lies. But the church can be a vanguard against falsehood, boldly speaking out wherever lies threaten us. We do not need to agree on the particulars of policy, or share ideological leanings to say there is no room for lies or distortions in our public and private discourse. We must speak words of truth everywhere we can—from the pulpit, through Facebook, in personal blogs, and on interactive web pages. We must be willing to call a lie a lie. For in a world desperate for the answer to the question “what is truth?” that is the only way we will ever fully be able to share the liberating love of Jesus Christ.

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# THE CANON AFTER GOOGLE: IMPLICATIONS OF A DIGITIZED AND DESTABILIZED CODEX

Ched Spellman

Analysis of technological innovation often fails to navigate between the Scylla of overdone alarmism and the Charybdis of uncritical optimism. There is reason to fear both theoretical adversaries, as each one usually militates against an even-handed and cogent analysis of cultural trends and technological paradigm shifts. A remarkable element of the current discussion regarding the changing ways people communicate and interact in our society is how quickly the mode of analysis has needed to move from anticipation to observation. In other words, we are no longer waiting for the advent of a new technological climate just on the horizon but are already partaking in a markedly different manner of cultural expression.

One issue the church would do well to consider as it proclaims “the old, old story” in a world saturated by new media is the effect of this climate on its central text. Indeed, there is a pressing need for the church to think strategically about the way it protects and proclaims the biblical canon.

## TECHNOLOGICAL PARADIGM SHIFTS

Though it is probably correct to think of our current shifting context as a unique historical phenomenon, this is by no means the first paradigm shift that has had a direct impact on the biblical text. During the Old Testament period, biblical books were written and transmitted on scrolls. Because it was impractical for a single scroll to contain the full contents of most biblical books, any notion of the biblical text as a whole was by necessity conceptual.<sup>1</sup> As the Hebrew Bible formed, the groupings of Law, Prophets, and Writings became an overarching framework by which to order the biblical material.<sup>2</sup> Thus, when readers picked up

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1 John Sailhamer notes that “any talk of a specific shape of the OT canon at that time would necessitate approaching it not in terms of its physical reality, but as a mental construct.” In this setting, an individual reading only a fragment of a text “could have understood it from within the larger context of this mental construct.” *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 211.

2 See Stephen G. Dempster, “Torah, Torah, Torah: The Emergence of the Tripartite Canon,” in *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Histori-*



a portion of a biblical scroll, they had to locate the portion that they were holding conceptually in relation to the other books held sacred.

Around the first century CE, the birth of the codex represents a seismic paradigm shift in the way written material was produced, transmitted, and understood by the typical reader. By at least the fourth century, the entire biblical canon was able to fit on one physical codex, bound together with contextual relationships ordered and solidified.<sup>3</sup> Readers of the canon striving to read individual writings in light of each other were greatly aided by this technological innovation. Though the specific content of the canon varied in different faith communities, it was easier to proclaim the Scriptures as a whole when they were bound together in a single codex. The rise of Gutenberg's printing press during the Reformation era standardized the book form and allowed for the unprecedented dissemination of published material.<sup>4</sup> This remarkable invention created the text-based culture that has endured for over half a millennium.<sup>5</sup> This set the stage for the eruption of new media.

With the rise of computer technology at the end of the twentieth century, a new way of communicating was born. Though there are many obvious similarities between old and new media, recent developments represent something unique. One obvious feature of this new climate is the digitization of many paper-based formats. The ability to digitize a codex means that the intrinsic connection between a book and the print form, previously understood as inviolable, is weakened. Experimentation with digital manifestations of former staples of the print-based paradigm is common. Increasing numbers of magazines, newspapers, and journals are being offered exclusively online. Though e-books have been on the radar for a number of years, the success of recent e-readers such as Amazon's Kindle and Apple's iPad have demonstrated that the practice of reading books electronically is here to stay.

While the digitization of the codex is an important feature of our current climate, the destabilization of texts perhaps best represents the drastic nature of

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*cal, Literary, and Theological Perspective*, ed. Craig Evans and Emanuel Tov (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 87-128.

3 For a helpful survey of the rise of the codex form, see David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 69-77. Trobisch also states that "in contrast to non-Christian literary texts, the New Testament has been passed on to us almost exclusively in codex form" (20). Cf. Robert A. Kraft, "The Codex and Canon Consciousness," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002): 229-34.

4 For an analysis of the impact the transition from "script to print" had on society in the late fifteenth century, see Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). Eisenstein characterizes the establishment of a print culture as "the unacknowledged revolution."

5 Neil Postman observes that "until the mid-nineteenth century, no significant technologies were introduced that altered the *form*, *volume*, or *speed* of information. As a consequence, Western culture had more than two hundred years to accustom itself to the new information conditions created by the press." *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 65.

the shift. The advent of the search engine revolutionized how many people use the Internet and also modified the way those users access and interact with data. Most text on the Internet is malleable, able to fit into whatever mold the given medium requires. It is no longer necessary to access an entire work or document, as search engine technology enables rapid keyword searching and access to related content via an intricate web of interconnections. As information continues to proliferate, possible intersections of loosely related data on the information superhighway are legion. The movement from text to hypertext thus creates a new technological environment that represents a challenge for readers, including those interacting with the biblical canon.

#### THE NEED FOR A MENTAL CONSTRUCT

A perennial question in the church and among biblical scholars has been, “*What* is the canon?” Centuries of debate and discussion have done much to complexify the historiographical account of canon formation but little to eliminate the question once for all. For Protestants, the canon consists of the sixty-six books contained in the Old and New Testaments. Though there is significant diversity among the documents, the church holds that a unity exists between them that can be viewed from a variety of angles by means of a number of disciplines.

In light of the significant and sweeping technological developments noted above, another question that rises to the surface is, “*Where* is the canon?” A digitized and destabilized Bible exists in a different way than in a physical codex form. In recent years there has been a trend towards what is called “cloud computing,” a phrase that describes the relationship between users and their data. In this model, users input data to web-based services and then draw it out of “the cloud” whenever they need to access it. Biblical readers who make use of this type of technology likely have also made adjustments to their reading habits. For these users, the biblical text exists in the cloud alongside terabytes of non-related information.

When reading the Bible online or on a mobile device, most of the time there will be rival texts vying for the attention and focus of the reader. The hyper-texted and inter-linked nature of most of the web will require a reader to exercise consistent discipline if he or she desires to read a large portion of text without distraction. Other options are always on offer and only a click away. In this context, the proverb of the day might appear right below your nephew’s birthday pictures, that bit of commentary on the book of Revelation comes just above your friend from high school’s comments on the season finale of *LOST*, and the Psalm you read a few moments ago gets buried in the Facebook feed just as quick as the embedded You Tube video that played while you were reading it. The lure of the link is a siren song often underestimated by casual users who are sometimes unaware of the lack of focus they devote to sustained reading.

If the codex form is understood as the glue that has held the many books of the canon in a firm contextual relationship, that glue is clearly not as dry as it once was. For an increasing number of people, the Bible as a stable document is being replaced by the Bible as a searchable database. As the primary medium



of accessing the Bible migrates more and more away from the book form, the issues of definition (what?) and location (where?) will need to be addressed with urgency and care.

Among other considerations, one of the ways the church can maintain the integrity of biblical unity is by encouraging and equipping believers to develop an intentional canon consciousness. This task will involve utilizing the concept of the Bible as a whole as a mental construct in the minds of its readers. Armed with a conceptual framework, a reader will be able to understand scattered parts of the biblical story in light of the bigger picture, regardless of the chosen medium. For instance, when an algorithm built into an iPhone devotional reading app generates a daily portion of the biblical text, it will be the task of the reader to contextualize those words in his or her mind. Without some form of mental construct in place, however provisional, the natural tendency to take passages out of context will become the commonplace starting point.

Though the church has always had the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel in light of all of God's revelation, this practice will become increasingly relevant as technology continues to modify and inform our reading habits. Encouraging believers to think about the textual context of any biblical verse or passage they encounter is one vitally important service the church should continue to render. The development of this type of canon-consciousness can be an effective way to salvage a "whole Bible" interpretive framework in a context that values serendipity over stability. Indeed, adopting an intentional strategy that relates individual biblical passages to one another will enable the church to remain faithful to the comprehensive nature of its central text, even if the people of the book become known as people of the e-book.

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# FAITH COMES FROM HEARING: THE SCANDAL OF PREACHING IN A DIGITAL AGE

Matt O'Reilly

Technological advance has brought rapid changes to dominant media forms. With these cultural changes have come calls for changes in homiletic presentation that correspond to the new ways in which people receive information in an age increasingly characterized by the widespread use of digital and image-based media. People communicate differently in the age of Google, Facebook, and Twitter. Reaching the next generation requires the church to change the way she communicates her message as well, or so it is said. Communicating this very sentiment, highly influential pastor and author Rick Warren has written, "Our message must never change, but the way we deliver that message must be constantly updated to reach each new generation."<sup>1</sup> To this end, Warren highlights the usefulness of TiVo to broadcast sermons into different venues on the church campus.<sup>2</sup> Resonating with Warren are the words of Erwin McManus,

The church must acclimate to a changing world, or she will destine herself to irrelevance or even extinction. What this means for the pastor as spiritual environmentalist is that he must understand the changing environment in which the church has been called to serve. One of those dramatic changes in our environment is the shift from words to images. To do church in a way that is entirely text-driven is the kiss of death.<sup>3</sup>

Various ways of incorporating new media forms into preaching have been introduced to the present day church. Satellite churches use digital media to broadcast sermons to multiple campuses.<sup>4</sup> Companies like Bluefish TV and Sermon Spice sell videos to introduce a sermon or illustrate homiletic points.

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1 Rick Warren, "Evangelizing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Culture," *pastors.com*: <http://www.pastors.com/blogs/ministrytoolbox/archive/2003/09/15/Evangelizing-the-21st-Century-culture.aspx> (Accessed August 18, 2010).

2 Ibid.

3 Erwin Raphael McManus, *An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God had in Mind* (Loveland: Group, 2001), 17.

4 Bob Smeitana and Rebecca Barnes, "High Tech Circuit Riders," *christianity-today.com*: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/september/24.60.html> (Accessed August 25, 2010).



The appearance of such companies serves to further highlight the reality that the arrival of the digital age has caused many to rethink the nature and necessity of the medium of the spoken word in preaching and in the life of the church as a whole.

Calls for changing forms of preaching are not limited to the use of image-based media. Emerging church leader Brian McLaren advocates movement away from dominant traditional analytic forms of preaching towards preaching that “mirrors the flow of a conversation.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Doug Pagitt, who has been called the “premier homiletician”<sup>6</sup> of the Emergent church, envisions the replacement of traditional preaching with what he calls “progressional dialogue.” According to Pagitt, progressional dialogue “involves the intentional interplay of multiple viewpoints that leads to unexpected and unforeseen ideas.”<sup>7</sup> Where traditional preaching models involve a consistent content specific message delivered by a single speaker, Pagitt suggests that with progressional dialogue “the message will change depending on who is present and who says what. This kind of preaching is dynamic in the sense that the outcome is determined on the spot by the participants.”<sup>8</sup>

New homiletic forms within the various streams of the Emergent church do not necessarily involve the incorporation of digital media into preaching. In fact, Pagitt raises concerns about the use of media to increase the hearer’s retention of the message.<sup>9</sup> This, however, does not mean that there is no relationship between the major shift toward digital media forms and the introduction of new homiletic forms like those advocated by McLaren and Pagitt. Though he does not use the specific language of “progressional dialogue,” Shane Hipps writes from within the Emergent movement and favors a dialogical preaching form which closely resembles that advocated by Pagitt. The Emergent worship scene described by Hipps includes a pastor who “periodically shares a Bible verse and a few brief thoughts, eliciting dialogue and feedback but being careful not to exude an aura of too much authority.”<sup>10</sup> Hipps attributes the current changes in preaching forms to shifts from word-based print media to image-based digital media. He claims that participatory and experiential changes in Christian worship, including preaching, were anticipated in the work of media ecologist Marshall McLuhan.<sup>11</sup>

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5 Brian McLaren, “Preaching to Postmoderns,” in *Preaching with Power: Dynamic Insights from Twenty Top Pastors*, ed. Michael Duduit (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 119.

6 Jim Shaddix, “To Preach or Not to Preach: An Evangelical Response to the Emergent Homiletic,” in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*, ed. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville: B & H, 2009), 283.

7 Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 52.

8 Ibid., 52.

9 Ibid., 149-50.

10 Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 145-46.

11 Ibid., 146.

McLuhan observed that image-based media, like television, engaged more of the human senses than printed media. This led to a feeling of deeper engagement and participation with image-based media and to a preference of moving images over the printed word.<sup>12</sup> McLuhan has argued that “the same new preference for depth participation has also prompted in the young a strong drive toward religious experience with rich liturgical overtones. The liturgical revival of the radio and TV age affects even the most austere Protestant sects.”<sup>13</sup> Building on the work of McLuhan, Hipps attributes the longing of many for participatory worship experiences to the shift from word to image-based media.<sup>14</sup> Even though he does not necessarily advocate the use of digital media in worship, he has argued that the arrival of the digital age has inclined people to seek out the kind of dialogical preaching that characterizes Emergent church worship. He concludes, “The Electronic Age has led to these emerging worship gatherings.”<sup>15</sup>

Three distinct positions can be identified to summarize the current conversation regarding the content and medium of the Christian message. First, there are those who advocate the preaching of content specific Christian orthodoxy by means of the spoken-word homiletic form (same content/same medium).<sup>16</sup> The words of Richard John Neuhaus will likely resonate with those who hold this view: “Experiment in preaching will avoid regular dependence upon visual aids and other gimcrackery in the pulpit. Such nonsense is not experiment with, but abandonment of, preaching – for preaching is the business of the spoken word.”<sup>17</sup> Second are those who understand themselves as maintaining the historic Christian message but advocate using new media forms to communicate it (same content/new media).<sup>18</sup> Third are those who see no need for continuity with the past neither in terms of message nor media (new content/new media). Building on the claim of Marshall McLuhan that, “The medium is the message,”<sup>19</sup> Hipps summarizes this third position saying, “I believe some of our methods, and thus our message, *should* change and evolve – this is part of God’s ongoing creation and relationship to God’s people.”<sup>20</sup>

As proposals for new content and media are made, the question must be raised as to whether such proposals are appropriate for the faithful communication of the Christian message. Does the church have the authority to change the

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12 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, critical edition, ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera: Ginko, 2003), 413-14.

13 Ibid., 427.

14 Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, 146.

15 Ibid., 146.

16 Cf. the essays in “Part 3: Contemporary Challenges and Aims” in *Preach the Word: Essays on Expository Preaching in Honor of R. Kent Hughes*, ed. Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

17 Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 188.

18 The above quotes from Rick Warren exemplify this position.

19 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 19.

20 Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, 88 (italics original).



medium through which the message is communicated? What effect will changes of form have upon the content of the message? How do we understand the goal of preaching, and are new homiletic and media forms sufficient to accomplish this goal?

This essay will defend the first position outlined above by focusing specifically on whether the church may revise the medium through which the message of the gospel is communicated. Our specific question can be stated thus: Are proposals for new homiletic media forms, which are the product of the major shift to digital media, consistent and faithful to homiletic media forms as understood by Christian scripture? To answer this question, we will first consider mission and preaching in Romans, which will show that Paul understands the primary medium of the gospel to be that of the spoken word. Through a close reading of portions of Romans 10, we will see that such spoken-word preaching is, in Paul's thought, characterized by a content specific message. Second, through an analysis of the problem of factions in 1 Corinthians, we will be able to see Paul's commitment to a particular counter-intuitive form of the spoken word. Here we will see parallels with the current debate as it becomes plain that the spoken media form of the gospel has always been counter-intuitive. We will conclude by considering the scandalous nature of the counter-intuitive word both in the first century and the twenty-first century.

While the second position outlined above is important and should be given attention, primary critical interaction will be with proponents of the third position, which largely characterizes the Emergent movement. The relevant literature evidences a more complex understanding of the relationship between message and medium that is particularly important as the digital age proceeds. Limitations of space and quality of argument require the taking of only one task at a time.

#### THE CONTENT SPECIFIC WORD

The importance of Paul's missionary plans for the rhetorical goals of Romans has not always been given just attention among Pauline scholars.<sup>21</sup> Romans 10:14-17 is one of the Apostle's most well-known passages on the importance of Christian mission. Interestingly, it comes in the middle of the section of the letter devoted to explaining Israel's national rejection of the Messiah and God's continuing plan for them (chapters 9-11). Paul emphatically declares his desire that his kinsmen be saved. Like the non-Jewish nations, they stand under God's just condemnation for their transgression (3:9-20). Paul does indeed hold onto hope that his fellow Israelites will once again be grafted into the people of God (11:23). In the meantime, though, the majority of Jews have rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Paul believes that this is the result of divine hardening which functions instrumentally to gather the nations now that the Messiah has come (11:7-12). His interest is not limited to his Jewish kinsmen. He is also concerned with the

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21 Robert Jewett's commentary is a significant exception. He argues that Romans is itself an effort to "gain support for the mission to Spain" (*Romans: A Commentary*; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007, 1).

expansion of the mission to the non-Jewish nations.<sup>22</sup> This point is made just prior to the series of rhetorical questions in vv. 14-17. Paul reminds his audience that no distinction exists between Jew and Greek. The one Lord of Israel is Lord of all (10:12). The declaration of Christ's Lordship is then substantiated by a quote from Joel 2:32: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." This quote works to substantiate the claim that, with regard to judgment, there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the context in Joel references the gathering of the nations for judgment (3:1-3). For Paul, though, this judgment is not necessarily cast in negative terms. Those who verbally confess the Lordship of Christ and believe that God raised him from the dead will find themselves justified and will be saved through this judgment (Rom 10:9). The major issue of this passage, then, is mission.<sup>23</sup> Paul is aiming to persuade his Roman hearers of the importance of the preached word. It is very plausible that he makes his case in chapter 10 to support the prospective mission to Spain (cf. 15:24). The mission-oriented nature of this passage is particularly instructive for our present questions because it is about the core message to be communicated and the form in which that message is mediated.

The nature of the mission and the hope for the salvation of the nations raises important questions for Paul. He has already claimed that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (10:13). The prerequisite for calling on the name of the Lord is faith, and Paul makes this and subsequent points through a series of rhetorical questions. The questions function to establish the prerequisites of hearing, having one to proclaim the message, and having someone send the one who proclaims. If the series of questions are not intended to directly persuade the Romans to support Paul and send him on to Spain, they certainly provide general substantiation for the importance of the potential Spanish mission.

Key to Paul's logic throughout the passage is the importance of hearing. In order to call out and be saved, one must first hear. In order to hear, one must first have a preacher. The logic comes to a climax in 10:17 where Paul writes *hē pistis ex akoēs*. The verse is often translated, "Faith comes from hearing."<sup>24</sup> The insertion of the finite verb "comes" indicates that the translators take the genitive construction *ex akoēs* to indicate the source of faith. It should be added, though, that Paul's Greek did not include a finite verb and could just as well refer to the instrument by which faith is brought to be, namely hearing the word of Christ (*hē*

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22 This does not, of course, rule out the salvation of the Jews. Paul indicates in 11:15-16 that the hardening that has come upon Israel will only last until the full number of Gentiles has come into the people of God. See Francis Watson, *Paul Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 337-38. *Contra* Watson, N. T. Wright argues that the salvation of all Israel does not refer to ethnic Israel but to the Jew-plus-Gentile people of God; cf. *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, vol. 10 of *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 689.

23 Cf. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans*, 666-67.

24 Cf. ESV, NRSV, NIV, NAS.



de akoē dia hrēmatos Xristou 10:17).<sup>25</sup> There is no reason to draw a fine distinction between source and instrumentality. The point is that, for Paul, faith cannot be brought to birth apart from the spoken-word. Further, Paul clearly delimits the content of that spoken word. It is the specific word of Christ (hrēmatos Xristou) that is the instrument through which faith is brought to be.

At least two observations may be made on the nature of the message and the medium as understood in Romans 10. First, the message has a specific content. Paul expects Christian ministers sent out in mission to speak the word of Christ (11:17). He is not commissioning ministers to speak the word of Paul or the gospel of the empire. Paul is not interested in letting his hearers set the agenda for the content of his preaching. He is interested in the specific message about the resurrected Lord. It is this message which must be confessed and believed.<sup>26</sup> Second, the medium for the message is the spoken word. Other media forms, such as a visual image, do not necessarily bring along the spoken word and, as a result, cannot be the instrument of salvation. The hearer needs specifically to *hear* because faith comes through hearing. Hearing the word of Christ is the source and instrument of that faith which is the condition of salvation. A painting of a gospel scene can be beautiful and moving. But until it is explained propositionally, it cannot lead ultimately to the call for faith. The image then is not the primary instrument of grace for salvation. Rather, the spoken word is primary.

As shown in the above discussion of Emergent worship styles, these two features—specificity and verbal medium—are precisely what Pagitt and Hipps suggest should be left behind. The service where participants can choose to express themselves through various interactive experiences means they may not even encounter the spoken word. The pastor who takes a progressional dialogue approach to preaching by initiating a conversation but hesitating to make authoritative pronouncements about the meaning of scripture hardly comes close to the Pauline expectation for content specificity. To leave the sermon open to any direction the group might take it grants no guarantee that the specific message of the cross will be heard. The result of such an approach leaves open the possibility that the specific content of the gospel will not be heard, which would make it impossible for faith and salvation to come through the hearing of the word of the cross.

To summarize, it is clear that apostolic preaching was expected to be specific and communicated verbally. This was important because the specific verbal content of the gospel was understood to be the vehicle by which a hearer

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25 C. K. Barrett argues that the logic of this passage would be better if v.17 came immediately after v.15a (*The Epistle to the Romans*; HNTC; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1957, 205). Such a conclusion is unnecessary, though, because the quotation from Is. 53:1 in v.16b introduces the idea of faith/belief which is then picked up in v.17; cf. Douglass Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996), 665.

26 See Moo: "The kind of hearing that can lead to faith, can only happen if there is a definite salvific word from God that is proclaimed," (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 666).

may respond in faith and so be saved. Representatives of the Emergent movement have advocated a move away from content specific preaching. If they are correct, then Paul was wrong. As shown above, advocates of Emergent shifts with regard to preaching and church are grounded in the shift towards visual and image-based media. We may conclude, at this point, that the digital age has caused many to rethink and abandon the dominant and historic focus on intentional and specific preaching. The significance of this radical abandonment is difficult to overstate.

### THE COUNTER-INTUITIVE WORD

Having considered how the dominance of digital media has led to a reconsideration of the apostolic focus on a content specific verbal message, we are now prepared to consider the counter-intuitive nature of the specific message both in the first century and in the twenty-first century. The starting point for our discussion is an analysis of the problem of factions in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. We will see that the unadorned language of the gospel in the apostolic context parallels a counter-intuitive insistence on content specific verbal preaching in the present day.

One of the several problems plaguing the church in Corinth in the middle of the first century was that of factions within the assembly.<sup>27</sup> Paul raised just this issue after his opening greetings (1:1-3) and prayer of thankfulness (1:4-9). Indeed, his first appeal is for the Corinthians to be in agreement with one another and to avoid divisions among themselves (1:10). The early placement of this appeal highlights its significance in Paul's flow of thought. He substantiates the appeal (*gar*) in 1:11 with a report from Chloe's people that there is strife (*eris*) among the Corinthians. *Eris* is commonly included in Paul's lists of transgressions that characterize the flesh or the unspiritual.<sup>28</sup> Three times he associates it with jealousy (*zēlos*).<sup>29</sup> This association is undoubtedly central to the problem in Corinth. In 3:3, Paul speaks of jealousy and strife among the Corinthians and links it to the division of the church into an Apollos party and a Paul party.<sup>30</sup> The all-important question has to do with what the Corinthians were quarreling about. What was the cause of their jealousy and strife?

To answer this question, we must consider the manner in which Paul defends his own ministry to the Corinthians in the opening chapters of his letter.

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27 Among the other problems were sexual immorality (1 Cor 5), neglect of the poor at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34), an unhealthy emphasis on manifestations of the Spirit (1 Cor 12-14), and the denial of the general resurrection (1 Cor 15).

28 Rom 13:13; 2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:20.

29 Rom 1:29; 1 Cor 3:3; Gal 5:20.

30 There appear to be at least three factions in Corinth: the Paul party, the Apollos party, and the Cephas party (1 Cor 1:12). There is debate as to whether a fourth Christ party exists. The statement, "I am of Christ," in 1:12 may be Paul's own statement of his allegiance to make the point that the unity of the assembly should be Christocentric; See Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 33-34.



Beginning in 1:17, Paul develops an extended contrast between the wisdom of words (*sophia logou*) or of the world (*sophia tou kosmou*) and the wisdom of God (*sophia tou theou*).<sup>31</sup> The contrast expands as Paul defends his own message of the wisdom of God while engaging polemically with the wisdom of the world. Paul's faithful communication of divine wisdom comes through the word of the cross (*ho logos tou staurou*), which is foolishness to the world (1:18). In defending his own unadorned message, Paul is critical of those skilled in debate and the persuasive arts (*suzētētēs* 1:20). Such people depend on their own knowledge and technique to impress the hearer in order to persuade. For Paul, such an approach to preaching masks the power of the gospel and leads to human boasting (1:31; 2:4-5). As a result, Paul was diligent in his preaching to avoid "superior words or wisdom" (*hyperochēn logou e sophias* 2:2). His purpose in avoiding such language was to ensure that the faith of his hearers was based on the power of God rather than human eloquence (2:5).

In light of this extended defense of his unadorned *kerygma* and his extended polemic against human wisdom, we may plausibly suggest that the factions in Corinth developed as some began to follow another leader who was particularly apt in rhetorical skill. In this case, Apollos is the obvious candidate.<sup>32</sup> Paul points to a chronological element in the movement of leadership from himself to Apollos. Using an agricultural metaphor, Paul indicates that he planted while Apollos watered (3:6). That is, Paul did the initial work of founding the church in Corinth, and Apollos came along afterward to continue the work. Paul's ministry was characterized by the specific word of the cross, but that word was not adorned with the eloquence characteristic of the rhetoric of the day.<sup>33</sup> Based on Paul's interwoven criticism of Corinthian factions and rhetorical eloquence, we may conclude that Apollos garnered a following precisely because of his rhetorical eloquence.<sup>34</sup> Such skill would have impressed the Corinthians and been sufficient grounds for boasting in their leader's ability to compete in debate with the sophists of the day. This explains Paul's deep concern about Corinthian boasting in human wisdom rather than in the Lord (1:26-2:5).

The counter-intuitive nature of the gospel becomes clear from our analysis of the factions in Corinth. First century convention demanded rhetorical skill and flourish. The citizens of Corinth would expect any orator who hoped to successfully persuade them of a certain position to dazzle them with eloquence and great wisdom. Against this convention Paul came preaching the message of

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31 Cf. 1 Cor 1:17, 19ff, 24, 30; 2:1, 4ff, 13; 3:19. According to Richard Hays, this is the fundamental theme in the letter (*First Corinthians*; Interpretation; Louisville, John Knox, 1997, 21).

32 Acts 18:24 attests to the eloquence, education, and enthusiasm of Apollos.

33 That Paul's initial evangelistic ministry in a new place was not characterized by rhetorical flourish does not necessarily mean that his letters did not utilize the common rhetorical elements of his day; cf. George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 9-10.

34 See Hays, *First Corinthians*, 22.

the cross. He spoke of a crucified and resurrected Messiah. Paul was no fool. He knew very well that this message would be seen as foolishness when considered in light of the rhetoric of the day (1:18). But that was precisely the point. If the message of the cross was adorned with eloquent and superior words, then the power would be seen as residing in the skill of the speaker rather than in the message of the gospel. When the power resides in the message, though, both hearer and speaker can only boast in the power of God. The result is the assurance of faith (2:5). If the assurance of faith rested solely on the skill of the speaker, then one's assurance could be lost if a more persuasive rhetor were to come along. But when the power lies in the message of the cross itself, then one's faith rests solidly on the power of God and not on the skill of an orator. Once again, Paul knows this to be counter-intuitive for his day, but he insists on it nonetheless.

How does this reading of the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians inform our understanding of new homiletic media forms? With the shift towards digital media, contemporary intuition suggests that preachers move in the direction of the culture. As we have already seen, the proliferation of digital and visual media forms has largely led culture towards alternative and more participatory sense-driven homiletic forms. The situation in Corinth is similar to our own. Orators skilled in rhetoric would have come across to the average Corinthian as being more highly participatory. They would engage the intellect and build up the hearers as those worthy of having all the rhetorical stops pulled out for the sake of their persuasion. In contrast, the bare message of the cross acted upon its hearers rather than dazzling them with human eloquence. The present day calls for alternative homiletic forms charm and attract much like the worldly eloquence of ancient orators. In our day, to insist on intentional and content specific verbal preaching is counter-intuitive, but this should not be seen as a new objection. Unadorned preaching was a scandal in first-century Corinth, but Paul insisted on it nonetheless.

#### SCANDALOUS PREACHING

We have seen that Paul's understanding of his mission was the basis of his commitment to content specific preaching as he planted churches in the first-century Roman Empire. For Paul, the goal of the mission was "to bring about the obedience of faith among the nations" (Rom 1:5), and that faith was the specific faith that came through hearing the word of the cross, the gospel. Faith is the divinely ordained means that leads the hearer to call on the name of the Lord and so be granted salvation. The problem for the mission arises in that faith cannot be had apart from hearing the preached message about Jesus' lordship and resurrection (Rom 10:9-10). This message has a very specific content, and to remove that content is to remove the very thing that evokes faith unto salvation. For Paul, then, specificity of content is of the utmost importance in preaching.

The Pauline approach to preaching stands in stark contradiction to Pagitt's proposal for progressional dialogue, "where the content of the presentation is established in the context of a healthy relationship between the presenter and the



listeners.”<sup>35</sup> Paul was not interested in simply beginning a conversation in order to see how it might play out. When Paul set out to plant churches, he already knew the core message he intended to proclaim. “I make it my ambition,” he wrote, “to proclaim the gospel” (Rom 15:20). This was Paul’s objective from Jerusalem to Illyricum (15:19) and from Rome to Spain (15:23-24). To replace content specific preaching with progressional dialogue in which the content is not determined until the dialogue proceeds is not re-imagining preaching but replacing it with something qualitatively different.

Not only is Christian preaching to be content specific, it is also often counter-intuitive. Our discussion of the factions in Corinth demonstrated just this point. The gospel itself is counter-intuitive because it is powerful despite its lack of adornment with worldly wisdom and eloquence. The division of the Corinthian church into a Paul party and an Apollos party was, for Paul, a great source of discontent. It is most likely the case that Apollos gained a following because of his eloquence and education. He was a leader whose skill in oratory would provide a source of boasting for the Corinthian Christians. This is what bothered Paul so deeply. The Corinthians were following their culture. The assurance that came through the gospel came paired with the fact that it was foolishness when considered in light of the wisdom of the day. Convention required that orations be adorned with special techniques, and the most successful orators were masters of these techniques. Paul did not want his missionary success to depend on his own skill or eloquence but on the power of God at work in the gospel alone. This was clearly counter-intuitive, but Paul insisted on it regardless.

New proposals for homiletics have been tied to the proliferation of image-based media with the arrival of the digital age.<sup>36</sup> Digital media cultivates a deeper desire for participatory engagement. As a result, worshippers seek a more participatory worship experience. As we have seen, just such an experience is proposed by Hipps in the Emergent style of worship. Intuition may suggest that we leave off old style preaching to follow the culture by embracing new and creative media forms. In such a climate, content specific verbal preaching unadorned by sense-driven forms is a scandal, a stumbling block. We are told that people want a more participatory experience. The preacher or pastor who is committed to the old form is easily seen as a relic of a bygone era. In the first century, the gospel unadorned with cultural wisdom was seen as counter-intuitive and even scandalous. How could Paul expect to reach the Corinthian culture if he did not speak their language and adorn his gospel with their wisdom? His lack of rhetorical flair was a stumbling block to many who heard him, a scandal that kept them from hearing his message. Our day is not so different.

We began with the question as to whether the church has the liberty to change the medium and the content of her message. Our answer is a resounding “No!” The unadorned and content specific verbal Christian message is still counter-intuitive, but it is not the “kiss of death.” It is, rather, the paradoxical power of

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35 Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined*, 23. Cf. Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, 145-46.

36 Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, 146.

God for salvation. As Paul was passionately, if not stubbornly, committed to the verbal and faith-evoking preaching of the gospel unadorned with contemporary and temporary convention, so now must we be as well. To do away with the specific proclamation of the gospel for the sake of mere dialogue in order to suit the desires of those immersed in image-based media would be to remove the scandal from the gospel. The arrival of the digital age has only served to once again magnify the scandal of preaching.

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# VIRTUAL WORLD CHURCHES AND THE REFORMED CONFESSIONS

Neal Locke

As the proliferation of online communities like Facebook and Twitter continues to attract widespread attention and commentary, a more subtle revolution is taking place that will have more far-reaching consequences for church and culture: the advent of virtual reality. Projections by researchers in the technology industry indicate that 80% of active Internet users and Fortune 500 companies will be engaged in some sort of virtual reality platform within two years.<sup>1</sup> Analysis of current participation shows that well over 100 million people already are.<sup>2</sup>

When people migrate to these virtual worlds, they bring their institutions with them. In the prominent virtual reality world of Second Life, for example, there are already presences maintained by major universities, corporations, government agencies—and even churches. The legitimacy of churches that function entirely in online virtual worlds has been the subject of much debate in the past year, and this will no doubt continue. For Reformed churches, however, this debate must be solidly grounded in our confessions: How do the confessions define church? What do they have to say about presence and worship that transcends presence? How do they speak to the church in the midst of cultural, technological, and social upheaval? The reformers likely did not anticipate the particular reason for which these questions are now being raised, and yet their work displays a remarkable understanding of human nature, society, and theology. In this way they offer both guidance and example for those who seek to be the church in the virtual world.

## ONE CHURCH, TWO NATURES

In seeking to define what the church is, the confessions often use the language of contrast and tension between extremes, reminiscent of early church councils that spent much energy debating and describing the dual nature of the second person of the Trinity. Perhaps the language of contrast and tension offers a model for thinking about the church in the 21st century as well.

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1 “Gartner Says 80 Percent of Active Internet Users Will Have A “Second Life” in the Virtual World by the End of 2011,” Gartner Research, accessed January 20, 2010, <http://www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=503861>.

2 “Looking across the metaverses. Total registered accounts,” Kzero Worlds-wide, accessed January 20 2010, <http://www.kzero.co.uk/blog/?p=1832>.



*Universal and Particular.* Most of the confessions distinguish between the greater catholic, or “universal” church and smaller, distinctive units, or “particular” churches.<sup>3</sup> Westminster describes the universal church as “all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, with their children,” and it seems likely that members of online churches would be included in this category with little controversy.<sup>4</sup> But can churches in virtual worlds also be viewed as “particular” churches? None of the confessions offers a clear definition of the particular church as being bound to a geographic location, although this might be implied in the contrast to the universal church, which clearly transcends location and is described by the Second Helvetic Confession as “gathered out of the world,” “scattered through all parts of the world,” and “not limited to any times or places.”<sup>5</sup>

If particular churches are indeed tied to location, it might be helpful to ask whether or not we consider the Internet itself to consist of or contain places. Our language in speaking of the Internet implies that we do: On the World Wide Web, information resides in what we refer to as a *website*, usually *located* by a web *address*. A person is said to *go to* a website or to *navigate* the Internet. Conversations take place in chat *rooms*, and even when we log *into* or *onto* online applications, our words invest them with a “particular” sense of place.

*Visible and Invisible.* The reformers made a distinction between the elect, known only to God and thus “invisible,” and those believers who “visibly” profess the true faith.<sup>6</sup> While this language pertains primarily to the doctrine of election, it has the interesting effect of placing the recognition of the church primarily within the sensory realm of vision, or sight. The “visual,” of course, is a central component of any virtual reality interface. When tempted to ask the question, “Is virtual reality even real?” it will be helpful to hold this standard in mind. For the reformers, both the invisible and the visible can be equally “real,” but things that, in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, “I see with my eyes” lend added legitimacy to those things which cannot be seen.<sup>7</sup>

*Public and Private.* The Second Helvetic warns that “Church meetings are not to be secret and hidden, but public and well attended.”<sup>8</sup> The concern against “private masses” is also raised in Westminster, and might constitute a valid critique of online churches where individuals are alleged to worship in the “privacy” of their own homes in front of a computer screen.<sup>9</sup> And yet a politician broadcasting her voice over the one-way medium of television or radio is said to be making a “public” address, and we warn young people against posting personal information in the “public” forums of the Internet. In an age where voice and image can be

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3 *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996), 3.16; 4.054; 5.125-6; 6.143; 9.31. All future references to the Book of Confessions will be abbreviated as “BoC” followed by the chapter and paragraph number.

4 Ibid., 6.141

5 Ibid., 5.125-6.

6 Ibid., 7.172-5.

7 Ibid., 4.075.

8 Ibid., 5.213.

9 Ibid., 6.164.

transmitted and received simultaneously in real time via the Internet, our cultural understanding of what comprises the “public sphere” is expanding. As with geographically based meetings held in buildings, whether an online church meeting is considered public or private will depend more upon the context and conduct of the meeting than upon the medium in which it occurs.

*Inclusive and Exclusive.* The Second Helvetic warns us not to “exclude, reject or cut off those whom the Lord does not want to have excluded or rejected, and those whom we cannot eliminate without loss to the church.”<sup>10</sup> And yet, just as the ancient Israelites were “set apart” by certain signs, so too by our sacraments God “distinguishes us from all other people and religions.”<sup>11</sup> This is a necessary form of exclusion. The Confession of 1967 balances it this way: “Wherever the church exists, its members are both gathered in corporate life and dispersed in society for the sake of mission in the world.”<sup>12</sup> Increasing segments of society are gathering and interacting with one another within virtual worlds: if the church ignores or denounces them, it runs the risk of being too exclusive, cutting off and rejecting potential members with great “loss to the church.” On the other hand, if the church merely disperses its members as “missionaries” to virtual worlds but denies them the use of the visible signs by which they are set apart—corporate gatherings, worship, sacraments, etc.—then the church runs the risk of not being exclusive enough, and becomes obscured.

*Embodied and Disembodied.* Body language permeates the confessions. The predominant metaphor for the church, in both scripture and in the confessions, is “the Body of Christ.” The Heidelberg Catechism instructs participants in the Lord’s Supper to “see with [one’s] eyes,” to “receive from the hand of the minister,” and to “actually taste” the bread and the cup.<sup>13</sup> This is a critical issue for virtual churches, who are subject to the charge that they offer a “disembodied” form of worship wherein the full range of bodily sensations is not available. And yet many virtual reality platforms offer an interface mediated by an “avatar,” which is a graphical representation of one’s self on the computer screen, often one that is highly detailed with a full range of motions and facial expressions controlled by the user. This makes for a more embodied experience than say, a text-only chat, or even a telephone call. Increasingly, just as people born in the age of telephones are not likely to think of a phone call as a “disembodied” experience, so too participants in virtual reality are not likely to perceive any disconnect with their bodies while engaged in virtual worlds. John Palfrey and Urs Gasser describe the typical attitude of “digital natives”—those born after the year 1980, who have never known life apart from the internet:

Digital Natives live much of their lives online, without distinguishing between the online and the offline. Instead of thinking of their digital

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10 Ibid., 5.140.

11 Ibid., 5.169.

12 Ibid., 9.35.

13 Ibid., 4.075.



identity and their real-space identity as separate things, they just have an identity (with representations in two, or three, or more different spaces).<sup>14</sup>

The technology then, is just a tool or a medium through which very real communication and relationships develop among very real people. And yet, even in the quote above, the word “identity” seems to be functioning in a way that, while not disconnected from the body, is at least distinct from it. Here again, it helps to turn again to the confessions—in particular, the Second Helvetic, which “affirm[s] that man consists of two different substances in one person: an immortal soul which, when separated from the body, neither sleeps nor dies, and a mortal body which will nevertheless be raised up from the dead at the last judgment, in order that then the whole man, either in life or in death, abide forever.”<sup>15</sup> There is then no separation of body and soul, and yet there is distinctiveness to each. One might argue that it is impossible to be engaged in a virtual world (or anything else) in a truly disembodied way, but that virtual worlds engage the body in new and different ways through the multi-sensory interfaces of keyboard, mouse, screen, and speakers.

Finally, the Second Helvetic reminds us of other biblical metaphors for the church: a flock of sheep, a temple, a bride, and a pillar.<sup>16</sup> Some are more or less “bodied” than others. The ultimate example of embodiment may well be the incarnation of Christ, but perhaps we miss the point if we latch exclusively onto the form—the flesh and blood—that embodiment took and miss another point of embodiment: God took on human form as the best means with which to interact with humans. If humans increasingly are interacting in virtual spaces, perhaps the church can follow Christ’s incarnational example by taking on a pixelated body of bits and bytes to once again become “the Body of Christ” in a strange new world.

*Present and Telepresent.* The term “telepresence” does not occur in the confessions, but rather originated in the technology industry in the late 1970’s to describe remote “presence” that is assisted by technology.<sup>17</sup> However, the notion of *non-ubiquity* found in the confessions indicates that the reformers of the 16th century had already approached very similar ideas.<sup>18</sup> In response to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, they argued that the resurrected body of Christ is seated at the right hand of God, and thus could not be “ubiquitously present” in the elements. They were, of course, careful to acknowledge that “notwithstanding the distance between his glorified body in heaven and mortal men on earth, yet we most assuredly believe that . . . he remains in [the elements] and they in him.”<sup>19</sup> According to Heidelberg, “shar[ing] in his true body and blood” is

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14 John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 4.

15 *BoC* 5.034.

16 *Ibid.*, 5.130.

17 Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009), 73; Douglas Estes, *SimChurch* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 63.

18 *BoC* 4.049.

19 *Ibid.*, 3.21.

only possible “through the working of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the Barmen Declaration says that “Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in Word and Sacrament through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> Just as the triune nature of God enables Christ to be spiritually present in one place while bodily present in another, is it possible that the dual nature of humans—body and soul, or body and identity—allows part of our nature to be physically present in one place, while another part is “telepresent” without any separation, division, or confusion of the two? Heidelberg says that the “Son of God, *by his Spirit and his Word*, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps this implies that, as with communion, the action of “gathering” or “being gathered” is possible across geographical boundaries.

#### THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

As witnessed in the previous section, the confessions display a remarkable diversity of language in describing what the church *is*. They are, however, far more concise in articulating what the church *does*, or how it can be recognized as the true and visible church on earth. One of the earliest Reformed confessions, the Scots Confession, identifies these “marks of the Church” as the “true preaching of the Word of God,” the “right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus,” and “ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered.”<sup>23</sup> Can churches in virtual worlds visibly display any or all of these characteristics? If this question can be answered in the affirmative, the confession continues, “Then wherever these notes are seen and continue for any time, be the number complete or not, there, beyond any doubt, is the true Kirk of Christ, who, according to his promise, is in its midst. This is not that universal Kirk of which we have spoken before, but particular kirks.” Note that that the minimum criteria established in the quote above is not that *all* three “notes” or marks be present, but simply *any* of them, “*be the number complete or not.*” With this in mind, let us look at how the confessions approach each individual mark:

*Proclamation of the Word.* The confessions define “the Word of God” in various ways: According to Scots, it is scripture.<sup>24</sup> The Barmen Declaration identifies it as Jesus Christ, while the Confession of 1967 distinguishes between Jesus as “the Word of God incarnate,” and the scriptures as “the Word of God written.”<sup>25</sup> The proclamation is likewise multifaceted: The Westminster Larger Catechism devotes four paragraphs to various ways in which the Word of God is to be read, preached, and even heard, while the Brief Statement of Faith devotes ten lines and a variety of actions to Jesus’ proclamation of God’s reign.<sup>26</sup> One unifying concept

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20 Ibid., 4.079.

21 Ibid., 8.17.

22 Ibid., 4.054.

23 Ibid., 3.18.

24 Ibid., 5.003-4.

25 Ibid., 8.11, 9.27.

26 Ibid., 7.267-70, 10.2.



in all the passages on proclamation or preaching is that this act somehow involves the transmission of audible speech from one person to others, whether through reading scripture passages or telling the good news of Christ. This presents no significant hurdle for churches in virtual worlds: indeed, the technology to transmit voice to a remote audience has been long used by churches who broadcast their services on radio or television. It might also be argued that remote proclamation of the gospel dates as far back as Paul's epistles to the earliest churches, especially if they were dictated verbally to a scribe and subsequently read out loud to their ultimate audience. Churches in virtual worlds still need to meet the confessional standards of preaching "sound doctrine," but this is an issue for all churches, and one not precluded by the means of delivery.<sup>27</sup>

*Sacraments.* The "right administration" of the sacraments as Christ instituted them is perhaps the most difficult and critical challenge faced by churches in virtual worlds. Douglas Estes, in his book *SimChurch*, catalogues four approaches online churches often take:

1. Do-it-yourself sacraments wherein participants use household elements at the prompting of an online minister.
2. Avatar-mediated sacraments in which the avatar partakes of the sacrament entirely within the virtual world.
3. Outsourcing sacraments to offline churches.
4. Simply avoiding the sacraments altogether.<sup>28</sup>

The prominence given to the sacraments in almost all of the confessions, and the cautions against withholding them, would seem to argue strongly against the last approach.<sup>29</sup>

Here again, the confessions distinguish between *what the sacraments are* and *what they do*. In answer to the former, the Second Helvetic tells us that the sacraments consist of "the word, the sign, and the thing signified."<sup>30</sup> Both the first and last of these seem independent of the medium in which the sacrament occurs, and as discussed in previous sections, are not inconsistent with a virtual setting. But the signs themselves—the bread, the wine, the water—these are tangible things with tactile properties, difficult to reproduce in a synthetically created environment. The confessions describe them as "things drawn from common use, things external and visible."<sup>31</sup> We are reminded again of Heidelberg's description of "seeing with . . . eyes," "receiving from the hand of the minister," and "actually tasting" the bread and the cup.<sup>32</sup> At least two of these actions would be quite difficult to achieve with the current technology of virtual worlds. And yet, while tactile language is included in this particular confession, does this represent the

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27 BoC 7.269.

28 Estes, *SimChurch*, 115-129.

29 BoC 6.164.

30 Ibid., 5.178.

31 Ibid., 5.178.

32 Ibid., 4.075.

primary emphasis that the confessions give to the elements? In response to the question, “What are the Sacraments?” Heidelberg answers that they are “visible, holy signs and seals...”<sup>33</sup> The Second Helvetic says the signs are “things external and visible” which God “outwardly represents” and “offers unto our sight.”<sup>34</sup> The Westminster Larger Catechism says they are “an holy ordinance instituted by Christ... to signify, seal and exhibit... the benefits of his mediation.”<sup>35</sup>

The remarkable consistency among the confessions is the importance which each gives to the *visibility* of the signs. Indeed, the word “sign” itself implies something that is seen with the eyes. Paul Tillich, in his book *Dynamics of Faith*, explains that signs, like symbols, “point beyond themselves to something else.” Yet signs “do not participate in the reality of that to which they point, while symbols do.”<sup>36</sup> This is consistent with the Reformed idea that, as mere signs, the bread and wine are not transformed into the body and blood of Christ, nor does the water of baptism itself actually become God’s grace.<sup>37</sup> The efficacy of the sacramental elements (not to be confused with the efficacy of the sacrament) consists not in the taste of the bread nor the temperature of the water, but rather in their ability to function as visible signs, calling to the mind of the participant the thing which they signify. A digital loaf of bread visibly broken, or digital wine and water visibly poured out are capable of doing this, just as a picture of a squeezed lemon is capable of stimulating the taste buds, or a video montage of an exquisite meal is capable of summoning up the hunger of a viewer.

Is it enough, then, to merely contemplate a picture or video of the sacramental elements in order to partake of them? In brief, no. The sacraments are not “merely” signs.<sup>38</sup> Here we turn to the second way in which the Confessions consider the sacraments: what they do. The Scots Confession tells us the Sacraments were instituted by God “to make a visible distinction between his people and those who were without the Covenant, but also to exercise the faith of his children and, by participation of these sacraments, to seal in their hearts the assurance of his promise.”<sup>39</sup> The Second Helvetic says that through the sacraments, God “distinguishes us from all other people and religions, and consecrates and binds us wholly to himself,”<sup>40</sup> and that through baptism in particular God “separates us from all strange religions and peoples.”<sup>41</sup> There are certainly strange religions and peoples in virtual worlds—if churches in virtual worlds outsource their sacraments to offline churches, or partake of actual elements “offscreen” in their homes, the sacraments are no longer visible to the “other people and religions” in-

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33 Ibid., 4.065.

34 Ibid., 5.178, 5.169.

35 Ibid., 7.272.

36 Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 47.

37 BoC 4.078, 6.166.

38 Ibid., 3.21, 5.181.

39 Ibid., 3.21.

40 Ibid., 5.169.

41 Ibid., 5.189.



habiting the virtual world. Conversely, churches in avatar-mediated virtual worlds can, through the avatars of ordained ministers, visibly break digital bread, audibly say the words of institution, and visibly pour out wine and water. Through their computers, congregants can hear the word proclaimed, see the elements broken and poured, and *through their avatars* actively participate in the receiving of the elements.

If an avatar is immersed in digital water or eats and drinks digital elements, who receives the benefit—the avatar or the person controlling the avatar? In a short paper on virtual sacraments, Oxford systematic theology professor Paul Fiddes argues that

An avatar can receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist *within the logic of the virtual world* and it will still be a means of grace, since God is present in a virtual world in a way that is suitable for its inhabitants. We may expect that the grace received by the avatar will be shared in some way by the person behind the avatar, because the person in our everyday world has a complex relationship with his or her *persona*.<sup>42</sup>

When Fiddes says “in a way suitable” and “in some way,” or even “complex relationship,” we might be reminded of how the Reformers often described the sacraments as “mystical” or “mysteries,” implying God’s ability to work in ways and materials that we can “see” but not fully understand.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, we are admonished in the confessions that “our hearts are to be lifted up on high, and not to be fixed on the bread.”<sup>44</sup> This “grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments, rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them.”<sup>45</sup> While “corporeal eating whereby food is taken into the mouth,” is taken into account, it is in the “spiritual eating” that Christ’s body and blood “are spiritually communicated to us,” providing the “the very nourishment and food of our souls.”<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, if the heart of a virtual world participant is lifted up on high as she sees the visible signs drawn from the “common things” of the virtual world, and if she partakes of them “in some way” via her avatar gathered with others in a community, that is, by these actions, visibly set apart, it becomes increasingly difficult to allege that she has not participated in “spiritual eating” or the grace that is imparted only by God.

*Discipline.* The care and attention the reformers devoted to order and discipline in the church is a hallmark of the confessions. Heidelberg lays out a specific and scripturally based method by which discipline is to take place: First, anyone acting in an “unchristian way” is to be:

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42 Brownblog; “Sacraments in a Virtual World?,” blog entry by Paul Fiddes, June 22 2009, <http://brownblog.info/?p=886>.

43 BoC 3.21, 5.156, 5.169.879654.

44 Ibid., 5.205.

45 Ibid., 6.15.

46 Ibid., 5.197-8, 3.21.

given brotherly admonition. If they do not give up their errors or evil ways, notification is given to the church or to those ordained for this by the church. Then, if they do not change after this warning, they are forbidden to partake of the holy sacraments and are thus excluded from the communion of the church and by God himself from the kingdom of Christ. However, if they promise and show real amendment, they are received again as members of Christ and of the church.

Admonition is entirely feasible within virtual worlds, and may be delivered by voice, by instant message, or even on virtual parchment. Group notification is perhaps even more efficient when assisted by technology—again, by gathering, voice chat, or group message. Finally, excommunication, or “banning” a user from a group is quite common in virtual worlds, even outside of the church, as are appeals for reinstatement. But the truest challenges in church discipline transcend technology and medium, requiring that, in the words of the Second Helvetic Confession, “at all times and in all places the rule is to be observed that everything is to be done for edification, decently, honorably, without oppression and strife.”<sup>47</sup> These are not so much characteristics inherent to virtual worlds or actual ones, but hopefully found in the practices of women and men who lead them.

#### SEMPER REFORMANDA

The oft-repeated motto of Reformed churches is “The church reformed and always to be reformed according to the word of God.” There is both tension and continuity in this. It is static and dynamic. Consider this passage from among our oldest Reformed confessions:

Not that we think any policy or order of ceremonies can be appointed for all ages, times and places, for as ceremonies which men have devised are but temporal, so they may, and ought to be, changed, when they foster superstition rather than edify the Kirk.<sup>48</sup>

And another, from among our newest:

Jesus Christ has given the church preaching and teaching, praise and prayer, and Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as means of fulfilling its service of God among men. These gifts remain, but the church is obliged to change the forms of its service in ways appropriate to different generations and cultures.<sup>49</sup>

The three “marks of the Church” carry a profound weight in the Reformed confessions, but the confessions also teach that “the church is not bound to its signs.”<sup>50</sup> The Second Helvetic Confession boldly proclaims:

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47 Ibid., 5.165.

48 Ibid., 3.20.

49 Ibid., 9.48.

50 Ibid., 5.137.



Yet here we acknowledge a diversity of times, and a diversity of the signs of the promised and delivered Christ; and that now the ceremonies being abolished, the light shines unto us more clearly, and blessings are given to us more abundantly, and a fuller liberty.<sup>51</sup>

How does this “fuller liberty” continue to manifest itself in the church? Is it time to elevate “new marks” from within the confessions—especially those that offer promise for Reformed churches in virtual worlds?

- *Evangelism or Mission*, though not frequently referenced, is nevertheless mentioned in the confessions and may be a distinguishing mark of churches that “pioneer” the virtual worlds in attempt to fulfill the great commission.<sup>52</sup>
- The proliferation in virtual worlds of digital, automatic, real-time translation programs might make the Reformers’ concern for “*worship in the common language*” a widespread possibility for the first time.<sup>53</sup>
- “*Visiting the sick*” in remote or dangerous areas is already practiced by medical doctors with the assistance of virtual reality technology, and will likely be a hallmark of churches in virtual worlds as well.<sup>54</sup>
- If a deeper connection with one’s physical body is required, the *spiritual practice of fasting*—also described in the confessions—would seem entirely plausible for members of online congregations.<sup>55</sup>
- The Heidelberg Catechism lifts up “*Christian education*” as essential to obedience of the fourth commandment, and if this is interpreted as “*discipleship*” finds resonance in other Confessions as well.<sup>56</sup> Research from the Sloan Foundation indicates a growing confidence among higher education leaders in the quality of online education, with the expectation among many that ultimately “learning outcomes for online education will be superior to face-to-face instruction.”<sup>57</sup> If the strengths of online education can be applied to churches in virtual worlds, perhaps Christian education will become one of the most visible hallmarks of the church in the 21st century.

Without minimizing or replacing the traditional Reformed marks of the church, the technology of virtual reality affords Reformed churches an opportunity to be less narrowly focused on certain ones while living more fully into all of the things the confessions compel the church to do and be. Likewise, the same technology will present its own challenges and temptations to churches in virtual

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51 Ibid., 5.129.

52 Ibid., 5.098, 6.190, 9.40.

53 Ibid., 5.217.

54 Ibid., 5.233; Tapscott, *Growing Up Digital*, 173.

55 Ibid., 5.227.

56 Ibid., 4.103, 5.146, 6.058, 9.51.

57 “Sizing the Opportunity: The Quality and Extent of Online Education in the United States, 2002 and 2003,” The Sloan Consortium, accessed January 23, 2010, <http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/survey03.asp>.

worlds. The confessions tell us that even “the purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error,” and that despite the faults of the churches in Galatia and Corinth, “[Paul] calls them holy churches of Christ.”<sup>58</sup>

For churches in virtual worlds, there are still many challenges, both theological and practical. We have here addressed some of them at length, some inadequately, and some not at all. Many have yet to surface. But the weight and thrust of the Reformed Confessions does not preclude or deny their legitimacy. In fact, the bold spirit of innovation in which many of the Confessions were written argues in favor of new and experimental types of particular churches.

The Confessions also caution and admonish, striking a careful balance between a Roman church that refuses to be reformed, and Anabaptist churches who have gone too far. Perhaps it is this *via media* that Reformed churches in virtual worlds ought to seek—not hanging back, but neither striking out empty-handed. Let them take the Confessions along for the journey, freshly elevating neglected sections from newly digitized pages, but still finding familiar ways to proclaim the Word, administer the sacraments, and exercise discipline in new contexts: a pixelated people, dispersed yet gathered, and visibly set apart by the God whose grace fills and transcends all of creation (including technology) to reach the elect in every time and place.

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58 BoC 6.144, 5.137.





# ‘THOU HAST GIVEN ME A BODY’: THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE VIRTUAL CHURCH

Travis Pickell

*“Thou hast given me a body,  
Wherein the glory of thy power shineth,  
Wonderfully composed above the beasts,  
Within distinguished into useful parts,  
Beatified without with many ornaments.  
Limbs rarely poised,  
And made for Heaven:  
Arteries filled  
With celestial spirits:  
Veins, wherein blood floweth,  
Refreshing all my flesh,  
Like rivers.  
Sinews fraught with the mystery  
Of wonderful strength,  
Stability,  
Feeling.*

*For God designs thy body, for His sake,  
A Temple of the Deity to make.”<sup>1</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the absolutely revolutionary effect of digital and Internet technology on society in the twenty-first century. For many people, the Internet provides an instant connection to friends, family, colleagues, workstations, entertainment media, and other valuable (or completely trivial) information. As a result, the world is becoming more networked, opportunities for entrepreneurial growth are more widespread, and the speed and efficiency of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Traherne, “Thanksgiving for the Body,” quoted in David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.



everyday life is increasing rapidly.<sup>2</sup> Add blistering growth in digital Smartphone technology, which effectively turns every mobile phone into a web-connected personal computer, and one can easily see that “connectivity” is quickly becoming the new norm—and a key societal value.

Many churches, for which “connection” between people is also a key value, are attempting to harness the power of these new technologies in innovative and exciting ways. Some Christians view the Internet as an invaluable tool for evangelism, teaching, community building and pastoral care. There are even some who advocate the formation of standalone virtual congregations: churches whose primary (or only) mode of meeting together is through the medium of the Internet. And yet, despite this optimistic embrace of the virtual world by some, the ambiguous nature of technological advancement also necessitates critical theological reflection. As noted by a study on “virtual Christianity” sponsored by the World Council of Churches, “being too quick to employ new technologies may lead to the divine message being shaped or even substituted by a human medium.”<sup>3</sup>

This essay will analyze potential opportunities and dangers presented by the phenomenon of Virtual Churches (VCs). The main contention of this essay is that the VC phenomenon conveys a truncated, anti-biblical anthropology, ultimately undermining the very gospel it is trying to share. Toward that end, §2 will outline what is meant by VC—including aspects such as the nature of cyberspace, digital representations of the self (avatars) and worship as practiced by some online communities today. §3 will attempt to disrupt the idea of a morally neutral technological medium. Following Marshall McLuhan’s aphorism “The medium is the message,”<sup>4</sup> it will show how technological media, regardless of apparently “sanctified” content, affect human society and psychology through implicit assumptions about what is important, normal, or even possible. §4 will then make the case for the importance of an embodied, Augustinian theological anthropology. Finally §5 will show how, by virtue of the “message” conveyed through its very “medium,” the VC movement is incompatible with such an anthropology. This essay will conclude with a call for a more critical engagement of the Church with the Internet—*engagement* because the Church is commanded to take the gospel into all the world (Matt 28:19), “and that includes cyberspace;”<sup>5</sup> *critical* because “that society never existed in East or West, ancient time or

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2 C.f. Thomas L. Friedman’s incisive description of the “flattening” of the world in the last 30 years. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

3 Jean Nicolas Bazin and Jérôme Cottin, *Virtual Christianity: Potential and Challenge for the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004), 2.

4 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 7.

5 Patrick Dixon, *Cyber Church: Christianity and the Internet* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications Ltd., 1997), 162.

modern, [one might add virtual or embodied] which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system.”<sup>6</sup>

### WHAT IS VIRTUAL CHURCH?

There are many in the Church today who have no idea that something called VC actually exists. And yet, the VC is a growing phenomenon, becoming ever more mainstream daily, as evidenced by the proliferation of Internet campuses hosted by some of the most successful churches in America.<sup>7</sup> An Internet campus is a website through which one can participate in chat-room discussions and online prayer groups with other members of the community, and, perhaps most saliently, where one can view the worship service live from one’s home. An Internet campus is often one of a number of satellite campuses in which a church’s worship service is broadcast to other groups meeting outside of the main campus building, which for reasons such as geography or space limitations cannot attend. An Internet campus, however, is not a VC, at least not as I am using the term in this essay. One may imagine the difference in that a VC is a church that meets corporately<sup>8</sup> only by means of an Internet campus. Or, to put it another way, a VC is a church that meets in cyberspace. In the early days of VC, members of the online community would simply log into a website where they could read sermons, access educational websites, or share prayer requests, joys, concerns, and experiences with other members of the community. In these early manifestations, the experience was primarily text-based, mediated through chat-rooms and Internet forums.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, however, VCs began to move toward more visually mediated ways of interacting in cyberspace, utilizing online virtual “worlds,” such as Second Life.<sup>10</sup>

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6 Andrew Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture: Is There a ‘Historic Christian Faith’?” in *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009), 139.

7 Notable examples include McLean Bible Church in Washington, DC (<http://www.mcleanbibleinternet.org/>); Liquid Church in Morristown, NJ (<http://live.liquid-churchonline.com/>); Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, CA (<http://saddleback.com/internetcampus/live/>); Life Church in Edmund, OK (<http://internet.lifechurch.tv/>); and North Point Community Church in Atlanta, GA (<http://northpointonline.tv/blog>).

8 This is an instance in which language is stretched to its limits by encountering new phenomena. As will become clear later in this essay, one of my critiques of VC is that its assumed theological anthropology is disembodied, and therefore in one sense *incorporate* (*corpus*=*body*). By “corporately” I mean “as a group.”

9 For two enthusiastic portrayals of some of these earlier essays into virtual community see Patrick Dixon, *Cyber Church: Christianity and the Internet* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications Ltd., 1997), and Walter P. Wilson *The Internet Church*. (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000).

10 <http://secondlife.com/>. Some VC communities, such as “The Church of Fools” (<http://www.churchoffools.com/>) and St. Pixels Church of the Internet (<http://www.stpixels.com/>), have created their own virtual worlds in which to meet, but many communities are utilizing the widely used and already established Second Life. E.g.



In these virtual worlds one's presence and all of her experiences are mediated through her online persona, or avatar. According to Philip Rosedale, the creator of Second Life, an avatar is "the representation of your chosen *embodied* appearance to other people in a virtual world."<sup>11</sup> One might say that a person's avatar is her mode of "incarnation"<sup>12</sup> in the virtual world. Through one's avatar one may visit new places, meet new people, have conversations, sing, paint, or even dance—all within the virtual world. VC advocates describe the avatar-mediated experience as an "embodied" existence in a world that is every bit as real as the one most people inhabit on a day-to-day basis. In fact, the goal is an experience that cannot be differentiated from a non-cyber experience. In this way "virtual" and "real" are not, for them, antithetical terms: the more virtual something is, the more real it is—and this is the case with virtual relationships, virtual community, and even virtual embodiment. Some VC advocates even look forward to a "fusion" of virtual reality with neuroscience, effectively making an avatar more than simply a visual representation of someone, but actually an extension of that person's self into cyberspace—psychologically, physically, and emotionally. A decade ago, an enthusiastic Walter Wilson wrote the following:

The future is not only about silicon. It is about biology. When the two are combined, they begin to move together. We can now see some things that stagger the imagination, such as a neobiological civilization of intelligent machines... The world of the born—all that is nature—and the world of the made—all that is humanly engineered—are becoming one in the same. Machines are gradually becoming biological, and biology is becoming engineered.<sup>13</sup>

All of this, however, represents only some of the most extreme aspects of the attempt to establish VC. Most of the actual engagement with VC, or with other Internet-related Church endeavors, is actually a great deal more commonplace—whether it involves speaking casually with other Christian users on an Internet game such as Second Life, posting a prayer request to an online listserv, or

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LifeChurch.tv, Second Life Bible Church (<http://www.dokimos.org/secondlife/>), and the 1st Presbyterian Church of Second Life (<http://www.1pcsl.org>), to name a few.

11 Quoted in Aaron Britt, "On Language: Avatar," *New York Times*, August 8, 2008, New York Edition. Italics added.

12 In classical Hindu, the term "avatar" (ava = 'down'; ti = 'cross') is most often translated into English as "incarnation." C.f. Noel Sheth, "Hindu Avatara and Christian Incarnation: A Comparison," in *Philosophy East & West* 52, no. 1 (January 2002): 98. *Religion and Philosophy Collections*, EBSCOhost (accessed July 29, 2010). C.f. Mark Howe, "Online Church? First Steps Towards Virtual Incarnation," *Grove Pastoral Series*, P112 (Cambridge: Grove Books Unlimited, 2007).

13 Wilson, *The Internet Church*, 47-48. This commingling of the technological and the biological was given popular expression in the movie "Avatar" (2009), which provides a (somewhat) conceivable expression of the extrapolation of the logic of virtually embodied experience, such as those described by some proponents of VC. Technology could one day plausibly enable people to embody a virtual avatar in a digital environment, in much the same way.

simply interacting with friends on social media sites such Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. These are things that many Internet users do every single day. Given the capability of rapid information exchange, as well as the already well-established trends in online social networking, why would anyone ever challenge the assumption that the Church ought to leverage technological advancements in the service of God's kingdom? If people are spending more and more time on the Internet, shouldn't the Church go there in order to share the gospel with them? Surely, if the Church does not utilize the Internet to spread the good news, it will only abandon it to ever more devious forms of content. After all, like any other technology, the Internet is a medium—and if a medium, is it not the content that matters most?

#### THE POWER OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIUM

This was the view of David Sarnoff, founder of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and president of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). After a distinguished career in telecommunications, Sarnoff received an honorary degree from the University of Notre Dame. In his acceptance speech he said the following: "We are too prone to make technological instruments the scapegoats for the sins of those who wield them. The products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determine their value."<sup>14</sup> This view of technology as inherently amoral (neither moral nor immoral) is the predominant view today, as it has been in most periods of technological optimism.

Marshall McLuhan, a younger contemporary of Sarnoff, reached a different conclusion. McLuhan, a brilliant—if eccentric—communications and media theorist, witnessed the rise of mass media and discerned its philosophical and sociological import to an almost prophetic degree. In his book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, he analyzed the history of technological advancement, with particular attention to the effects of new technologies on those who use them. Contrary to the view expressed by Sarnoff—that the technological medium itself is neither good nor bad; what matters is the message the medium carries—McLuhan asserted that, in fact, "the medium *is* the message."<sup>15</sup> The medium of communication, according to McLuhan, actually does more to affect us than the content. Any new technological development—eyeglasses, pocket watches, tennis shoes, airplanes, written language, etc.—is a medium that implicitly carries with it a set of assumptions about what is important, normal, or even possible. These underlying forces usher in drastic changes regardless of the content carried by the medium. According to McLuhan, these changes are inherent within the technological medium itself—not a result of the content actually printed on the pages of the books themselves. This is what is meant by "The medium is the message." "The 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs."<sup>16</sup>

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14 Quoted in McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 11.

15 Ibid., 7. Italics added.

16 Ibid., 8.



Not one to mince words, McLuhan referred to Sarnoff's comments as "the voice of the current somnambulism."<sup>17</sup> Further, he adds, "our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot."<sup>18</sup> Such a view of technological instrumentalism is actually dangerous because "any medium has the power of imposing its own assumptions on the unwary."<sup>19</sup> Focusing on the "content" is misguided because "it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium."<sup>20</sup> For McLuhan "the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind."<sup>21</sup>

McLuhan, however, was no conservative reactionary. He was not simply decrying the use of technology as inherently evil or dangerous. Rather, the contrary is true. McLuhan supported technological growth and development; only he recognized that new technologies, in turn, affect humanity. His aim was to decipher and anticipate the effects of media in order to better control them. He saw every new technology as an extension of the reach of humankind, and he wanted to prevent the inversion of the relationship. Through uncritical use of new technology, there is always a danger that humans become subject to their own creation on some level; "subliminal and docile acceptance of media impact [makes new media] prisons without walls for their human users."<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the most amazing thing about the analysis McLuhan proffered in *Understanding Media*, is that rather than becoming outdated after almost 50 years, it is more applicable today than ever. Consider the following quotation, written decades before the Internet became a popular medium:

Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media.<sup>23</sup>

Those familiar with the open-source online encyclopedia Wikipedia, or the rapid-fire social media platform Twitter, will instantly recognize parallels with McLuhan's vision of a collectively shared "creative process of knowing." McLuhan's analysis is as relevant as ever, and it would behoove us to pay attention to him.

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17 Ibid., 11.

18 Ibid., 18.

19 Ibid., 15.

20 Ibid., 9.

21 Ibid., 18.

22 Ibid., 20.

23 Ibid., 3-4.

In a book published earlier this year, technology writer Nicholas Carr did just that. In *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*,<sup>24</sup> Carr attempts to answer the question: How is today's technology, specifically the Internet, affecting us? What he has found is that the "process of [shared] knowing" described by McLuhan is happening today on a wide scale. This has had the effect of dramatically increasing access to information and knowledge on a broad scale. But the price we are paying for width and breadth of information is a shallowness of thought. Carr argues that our brains are "plastic," that is, they are molded and shaped continually as a result of how they are used (or not used). Carr warns: "One thing is very clear: if, knowing what we know today about the brain's plasticity, you were to set out to invent a medium that would rewire our mental circuits as quickly and thoroughly as possible, you would probably end up designing something that looks and works a lot like the Internet."<sup>25</sup> We are becoming a distracted people, and this is evidenced not only sociologically and anecdotally, but also neurologically. The next section of this paper will explain how the idea of VC conveys a theological anthropology that devalues the body. What is important to note here, however, is that apart from the theological and philosophical assumptions involved, prolonged uncritical engagement with the Internet itself may actually physically harm our bodies, by molding and shaping our neurological connections in ways that we cannot actually understand without further research and reflection.

## ARE WE OUR BODIES?

### A CASE FOR AN EMBODIED THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

At this point it may be helpful to recall the early discussion of the VC (§2). Those who argue for the validity of VC stress that congregations that meet virtually in cyberspace are participating in "real community." The relationships that are formed are genuine, so much so that when a long-time member of the community stops attending virtual worship meetings, the community is likely to follow up to see if something is wrong.<sup>26</sup> Apart from the highly problematic issue of the sacraments,<sup>27</sup> VC advocates argue that a virtual congregation lacks none of the essential marks of the Church. In fact, many will point to the fact that physical proximity was never a prerequisite for Church community, going so far as to call Paul the first "cyberapostle"<sup>28</sup> because he used the technology available (pen,

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24 Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010).

25 Carr, *The Shallows*, 115.

26 C.f. Howe, "Online Church?"

27 I have chosen not to focus on sacramentology in this paper, as important as it is, because of the wide range of views on sacramentology in the Church. Whereas an argument against the VC on the basis of the impossibility of virtual sacraments could be sidestepped by those with a lower view of the sacraments, the argument against a truncated theological anthropology stands for any Christians who hope to avoid the charge of latent Gnosticism.

28 Dixon, *Cyber Church*, 153.



ink, written language, etc.) to communicate his presence virtually throughout the known world. But for Paul, virtual presence was always a regretful concession, never the ideal situation. He repeatedly professed his desire to be physically present with those to whom he writes (Rom 15:32; 1 Cor 16:6; Gal 4:20; Phil 1:26). Much of the New Testament suggests that there is something about “meeting together” (Heb 10:25) physically that is essential to human community.

One’s views about the essentials of community reflect deeper assumptions about what it means to be human. Theological anthropology, the study of what it means to be human in relation to the divine, ought to be an important aspect of any reflection on ecclesiology because it influences how one conceptualizes fundamental Christian doctrines, such as sin, salvation, sanctification, eschatology and ethics.

In a recent book, James K.A. Smith elaborates three theological anthropologies that are dominant in the Church today. The first, and probably the most prevalent, is the rationalist picture of humanity—“as old as Plato but rebirthed by Descartes and cultivated throughout modernity, [this model] sees the human person as fundamentally a thinking thing.”<sup>29</sup> The resulting theological anthropology is characterized by a view of humanity as “essentially immaterial mind or consciousness—occasionally and temporarily embodied, but not essentially.”<sup>30</sup> Smith argues that this rationalistic anthropology was “absorbed particularly by Protestant Christianity (whether liberal or conservative), which tends to operate with an overly cognitivist picture of the human person and thus tends to foster an overly intellectualist account of what it means to be or become a Christian.” When the Church functions under this anthropological model salvation occurs through the dissemination of religious knowledge and stress is laid upon orthodoxy (right doctrine), often to the exclusion of orthopraxis (right action) and the formation of patterns of intentionality (right loves).

This rationalist anthropology is not without its critics. Some, especially within the Reformed tradition,<sup>31</sup> have charged this viewpoint with reductionism and an insufficient account of human knowing. “Before we are thinkers,” they say, “we are believers.”<sup>32</sup> One’s thinking, more often than one may realize, has its proper basis in faith. At some level there is a prior element of trust in some “authority,” be it one’s parents, teachers, or textbook writers. According to this

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29 James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 41.

30 *Ibid.*, 42.

31 C.f. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984); Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

32 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 43.

theological anthropology, human beings are “essentially religious.”<sup>33</sup> This view attempts to move a person’s center of gravity, so to speak, from her head to her heart. But as Smith points out, it is unclear whether the “person-as-believer” model goes far enough in this direction. Smith continues,

While in the person-as-believer model, the human person is not a “brain in a vat,” she still seems like an isolated, disembodied island of beliefs. In this model, the “believer” feels like a chastened rationalist . . . to put it otherwise, if I bump into a “thinking thing” and a “believing thing” on the street, I don’t think I’d notice much difference.<sup>34</sup>

The problem with both of these theological anthropologies is that they are truncated. They “reduce us and our core identities to something less than they should be.”<sup>35</sup> “As a result, significant parts of who we are—in particular, our noncognitive ways of being-in-the-world that are more closely tethered to our embodiment or animality—tend to drop off the radar or are treated as nonessential.”<sup>36</sup> In short, the person-as-thinker and person-as-believer models are “insufficiently Augustinian.”<sup>37</sup> They do not properly take into account the complex relationship between human desires, intentions, habits, and loves— aspects of humanity about which Augustine wrote prolifically.

For Augustine, the most fundamental way that one relates to the world is through love. “To be human is to love, and it is what we love that defines who we are. Our (ultimate) love is constitutive of our identity.”<sup>38</sup> The problem (after the fall) is not that we do not love, but that our loves have become disordered.<sup>39</sup> Whereas the only proper object of one’s ultimate love is God, humans tend to love lesser goods—above all themselves.<sup>40</sup> Psychologically, our loving intentionality “takes the structure of desire or longing.”<sup>41</sup> “The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing. . . . This is our life: to be trained by longing, and our training through the holy longing advances in the measure that our longings are severed from the love of this world”<sup>42</sup> and turned towards God.

One might ask, how does our love get aimed in different directions? For Augustine, this takes place through our habits or dispositions. According to Smith,

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33 Ibid., 43.

34 Ibid., 45.

35 Ibid., 46.

36 Ibid., 46.

37 Ibid., 46.

38 Ibid., 51.

39 St. Augustine “Sermon 335c: On the feast of a martyr,” in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 59.

40 C.f. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 15.22, 19.24-26; *De doctrina Christiana* 1.27.28; *Confessiones* 1.1.1, 10.6.9; *Sermon* 335c.5.

41 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 50.

42 Augustine, *Homilies on 1 John*, 4.6 as quoted in Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 50.



our dispositions are “the *fulcrum* of our desire: they are the hinge that ‘turns’ our heart, our love, such that it is predisposed to be aimed in certain directions.”<sup>43</sup> Our dispositions, however—and this is the key point—are not primarily influenced by our rationality or our system of beliefs. Rather, “the *senses* are [the] portals to the heart, and thus the *body* is a channel to our core dispositions and identity.”<sup>44</sup> This is why embodiment must be absolutely central to any theological anthropology. From the earliest age, human beings experience the world as a constant influx of sensory experiences, some causing delight and others causing pain. As one comes to understand what experiences cause delight, she responds in kind, and habits—or dispositions—take root in her heart. “It’s as if our appendages function as a conduit to our adaptive unconscious—sort of attitudinal reflexes—that make us tend to act in certain ways toward certain ends.”<sup>45</sup> That is to say, “our primary orientation to the world is visceral, not cerebral.”<sup>46</sup>

What Augustine understood was “that the Christian doctrines of creation, the incarnation of Christ, and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body all imply that the body has a high metaphysical status and is an integral and permanent part of human being.”<sup>47</sup> Our bodies, souls, minds, and emotions are all tightly wound together because they are all equally part of who we are. This more embodied Augustinian theological anthropology better reflects both human experience and the Biblical witness. While it is true that some major religious and philosophical schools of thought have encouraged a view of humanity that separates body from soul, effectively bifurcating the human person, the truth remains that humans are, in fact, integrated beings.

Today, there is a renewed interest in the essential importance of embodiment for theology. Feminist theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel argues for a theology *of* embodiment. “In a variety of situations,” says Moltmann-Wendel, “we can distance ourselves from our bodies, but at some point they get hold of us and will not let go.”<sup>48</sup> In the Scriptures, she points out, if one “start[s] from the creation, not from the ‘fall’,”<sup>49</sup> one will find that God created a good world characterized by a celebration of embodiment. In the New Testament, if one looks at the life of Jesus one notices some intriguing phenomena: the centrality of physical healings to Jesus’ ministry,<sup>50</sup> the way in which Jesus’ teachings address the entire human situation (physically *and* spiritually),<sup>51</sup> and the way in which Jesus enjoyed sharing meals with those around him.<sup>52</sup> But above all, the

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43 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 50. Italics original.

44 Ibid., 50. Italics added.

45 Ibid., 59.

46 Ibid., 60.

47 Miles, *Rereading Historical Theology*, 100.

48 Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 21-22.

49 Ibid., 36.

50 Ibid., 36.

51 Ibid., 37.

52 Ibid., 49.

doctrines of incarnation and resurrection emphasize the importance of the body to any theological anthropology: “a theological return to embodiment recalls the distinctive feature of Christianity, that God became body and in so doing has confirmed and healed all our bodily nature.”<sup>53</sup>

#### WHAT VIRTUAL CHURCH CONVEYS ABOUT THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Of the three anthropological viewpoints just described, only the first two are compatible with the idea of VC. If what essentially makes us human is our ability to think and reason, then there is no reason why our presence cannot be mediated through a digital representation of the self (avatar). Humans can legitimately communicate with one another in this way. They may have enriching conversations with one another, and perhaps, even work out important intellectual and social problems. No doubt, valuable educational opportunities will arise as humanity learns to take advantage of cyberspace as a virtual meeting place, as is already happening with online distance-learning courses offered at colleges around the country. In a similar way, VC is completely consonant with the person-as-believer model. One must assume that many of those who are already inhabiting virtual worlds like Second Life do not yet believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. What better way to reach them than to start a digital church-plant right in the middle of their virtual neighborhood? If what is most important about us as humans is simply that we believe, then there is no excuse for the Church *not* to do so.

What makes the VC phenomenon such a difficult ethical problem to unravel is the fact that there is some truth in each of these viewpoints. That we are rational beings is certainly a central part of our mandate to be stewards of creation (Genesis 1:27-30). And who would deny the importance of belief in the Christian life (John 6:29)? If, however, the medium *is* the message, then our ecclesiology conveys something about the gospel itself—whether we mean for it to do so or not. If a VC is a legitimate congregation of human beings mediated through virtual representations of the self (avatars), this suggests that what is most important about the self does not include the body. Doubtless some of those who are involved with VC would deny this as a misrepresentation of their views. But this misses the point. If McLuhan and Carr are correct, a VC will convey this “message” implicitly, rather than explicitly. In fact, no claim is being made about the explicit viewpoints of those utilizing this technology except the following: their anthropological views are incompatible with their mode of ecclesiology *if* they subscribe to the third type of theological anthropology outlined above. While humans may certainly be more than their bodies, they are also certainly no *less* than embodied creatures.

Some people see the VC as a new way of “embodying” the church in a digital age. This use of embodiment language, however, is artificial; what it conveys is only the semblance of embodiment, while leaving the actual body behind. While it is certainly true that when people participate in computer-mediated virtual worlds they experience somatic effects, this is only an accidental by-product of the fact

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53 Ibid., 103.



that they are in-fact using their bodies in the process of fleeing from their bodies. Any language of virtual embodiment, then, relies heavily on borrowing from actual embodiment in the process of denying its importance. Virtual embodiment is, in this sense, only derivative of actual embodiment, and is, in fact, ultimately a perversion of it.

As with any new technology, these dangers are implicit and subtle, and therefore, all the more pernicious. This is certainly the case with reference to the ambiguous relationship between technology and embodiment—between the body and the machine. As Wendell Berry once wrote,

The danger most immediately to be feared in “technological progress” is the degradation and obsolescence of the body . . . since the beginning of the technological revolution, more and more people have looked upon the body, along with the rest of the natural creation, as intolerably imperfect by mechanical standards. They see the body as an encumbrance of the mind—the mind, that is, as reduced to a set of mechanical ideas that can be implemented in machines—and so they hate it and long to be free of it. The body has limits that the machine does not have; therefore, remove the body from the machine so that the machine can continue as an unlimited idea.<sup>54</sup>

If the body is not to fall into obsolescence in the face of technological advancement, as Berry feared, then how should the Church envision its engagement with the virtual world? Clearly, there must be some level of engagement. There are people who spend a great majority of their lives on the Internet, many of them participating in virtual worlds such as Second Life. They are not beyond the reach of the love of God, and therefore the Church must seek to reach them with the gospel. The virtual world is a mission field. Missiologist Andrew Walls offers a distinction that might be helpful here. He distinguishes between two opposing tendencies, “each of [which] has its origin in the gospel itself.”<sup>55</sup> The “indigenizing principle”<sup>56</sup> gives voice to the fact that the gospel can “make itself at home” in any cultural context (including the idiosyncratic cultural context of Second Life). But “along with the indigenizing principle... the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society.”<sup>57</sup> In its engagement with the virtual world, the Church must hold onto a sense of *provisionality*. In advocating for standalone virtual congregations, VC enthusiasts unwittingly (and sometimes wittingly) send a message that relativizes the human body. The Church should engage the virtual world in the name of the gospel, but “making a place

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54 Wendell Berry, “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” in *What are People For? Essays by Wendell Berry* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 190-191. Once again, the film “Avatar,” gives popular expression to the latent escapism implied in the ideal of virtual embodiment.

55 Walls, “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” 137.

56 Ibid., 137.

57 Ibid., 139.

for Christianity in the virtual world does not mean that Christianity should itself become virtual or disembodied.”<sup>58</sup> Let us not forget the words of Traherne, “Thou hast given me a body.”

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58 Bazin and Cottin, *Virtual Christianity*, 1.





# HACKING INTO THE CHURCH MAINFRAME: A THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT OF THE POST-INFORMATIONAL WORLD

Henry Kuo

*... the first social ethical task of the church is to be the church ...*

- Stanley Hauerwas<sup>1</sup>

It should come as no surprise to the reader that we live in the midst of an increasingly technological society. By technological we refer to the internet-based communications technology that is commonly referred to as Web 2.0. The term was conceived by Darcy DiNucci to describe a new evolution to the internet.<sup>2</sup> In Web 1.0, internet users communicated to each other largely through webpages and e-mails. Web 2.0, on the other hand, signified a greater communicative revolution through which internet users can get to know each other. This includes social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as information sources such as Google or Yahoo. Corporate interests routinely utilize this evolved internet in their marketing efforts, since by gathering specific necessary data online, they can tailor marketing efforts for each specific individual for the maximum effect.

It is common to perceive such technological advances as both ethically neutral and as *Pareto optima*; that is, they come with many benefits and few, if any, drawbacks. Even though the internet revolution has, unfortunately, revolutionized the pornography industry for example, most people whose exposure to communications technology is limited to common websites and e-mail are tempted to conceive of such technologies as an ethical free-for-all, where everyone can enter and find the information they desire with no effect whatsoever on their ethical worldviews. Even churches have wasted no time in taking advantage of Web 2.0 technologies, in some cases going so far as existing only on the internet. These are the so-called virtual churches where people can literally attend church in their underwear—at least in theory.

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1 Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 99.

2 Darcy DiNucci, "Fragmented Future," *Print* 53, no. 4 (1999): 32.



But is Web 2.0 and its related communications technology ethically neutral? With the exception of obvious ills, do they indeed have very few, if any, ethical drawbacks? Even before the internet underwent its evolutionary ascension, computer engineers and philosophers have given some thought to these questions. Few have taken such insights and applied them to the life of the church. How does the church make use of such technologies? How has the church abused it? And, most importantly, what is the church's witness in a world of Facebook, Twitter, and Google?

#### THE POST INFORMATION AGE

In 1995 Nicholas Negroponte wrote about a "post-information age." At the time, the internet was beginning its transition from purely academic and research applications into commercial sectors. His book, *Digital Beings*, was important because it was arguably one of the first books that took seriously the notion that such post-Google technologies were not ethically neutral.

What, then, is the "post-information age?" Negroponte describes three aspects of it. First of all, the paradox of mass-media is becoming "bigger and smaller at the same time."<sup>3</sup> Previous mass-media technologies focused on expanding their reach in order that they might be exposed to a larger demographic. Post-information communications technology becomes so far-reaching that nobody is left untouched, but at the same time, it is so small that it caters to the single individual as demographic of interest. Thus, as DiNucci notes, the internet will become fragmented because the information provided will become increasingly individualized, catering towards the individual habits and preferences of the user.<sup>4</sup> Amazon.com makes use of such a communications strategy in their product "recommendations," which are based upon the customer's purchasing history. The objective is to tailor the communications so that it applies wholly—that is, to make it completely relevant and personal—to as many individuals as possible.

The second characteristic of the post-information age is an emphasis on immediacy, which is the result of a gradual dissolution of time and place in life.<sup>5</sup> Previous communicative technologies depended on some sort of proverbial schedule. Friends would meet at a certain time and place, for example, where they can keep each other updated on the latest goings-on in life. But with Facebook, Skype, and Twitter, this updating is instant and occurs anywhere. A friend could be at a concert in Los Angeles and—via Twitter—tell his friend in New York about how amazing the concert is. Even economic exchanges have taken on an air of immediacy. Previous exchanges took place at a location—usually a store—at a time the consumer had parceled out for the specific purpose of consuming. Today's consumers could purchase anything in a few seconds. The location of the purchase is a virtual store such as Amazon or iTunes, which is easily accessible at any time of the day, seemingly operating outside the bounds of time and space.

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3 Nicholas Negroponte, *Digital Beings*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 164.

4 DiNucci, "Fragmented Future," 32, 221.

5 Negroponte, *Digital Beings*, 167.

An increasingly individualized mass media coupled with the consumers' immediacy leads to a world where information is no longer "pushed" to the masses, but that information is simply made available for the masses who fish for the information they desire, making them "information consumers." Such is, indeed, the post-informational world embodied by Google, whose search service is precisely just that: allowing internet users to find whatever they desire a split second. This year, Google introduced a new "instant search" device whereby the website comes up instantly with search results, to be updated with every new letter the user types into the search parameter. Such new technologies make "fishing for information" faster and easier.

When such "informational consumerism" abounds, no longer does the important information become news, but the information alone is the news since it is so tailored to individual tastes.<sup>6</sup> Thus, amassing more of them is better. And just like material consumerism, we become convinced that the more we know about "stuff," the farther along we progress in terms of human development. The quality, the meaning of the information we accumulate, is not as important as the fact that we accumulate a lot of information.

The third aspect is a more interconnected world, where geography becomes less of a limiting factor. It is indeed possible now, through Google and Wikipedia, to know much about China without actually having to physically visit the country. Yet knowledge and intimacy are not the same. The accessibility of knowledge leads us to easily deceive ourselves into thinking that we indeed know "stuff" with some degree of familiarity. David F. Wells writes, "We have undergone a staggering enlargement of our personal circumference, which now contains within it many whom we 'know' without actually ever having met."<sup>7</sup>

What is the significance of this for post-informational age? It is instructive to compare the communications revolution that is the internet to the revolution that was the printing press. The printing press, simply put, allowed for the voices of the few to make a difference for many by way of making the distribution – and therefore dissemination – of information more efficient. The success of the Protestant Reformation was thereby ensured as the theology and writings of the Reformation magisterium were quickly distributed to everybody. No longer were spiritual truths accessible only to clergymen; now they were also made accessible to the laity.

Yet history would reveal the dangers of abusing the privilege of informational accessibility. An unfortunate consequence of the Reformation was that the laity, if not instructed properly, could embrace an individualistic reading of the Scriptures. The modern repercussions of that were not lost to Stanley Hauerwas, who wrote that "no task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America," for they "read the Bible not as Christians, not as a people set apart, but as democratic citizens who

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6 Ibid., 170.

7 David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 1998), 82.



think their common sense is sufficient for the understanding of scripture.”<sup>8</sup> Such a communications revolution can inflate the self by, as Graham Ward warns, approximating “modernity’s Promethianism... [which is] the vision of human potential... where human beings can become whatever we will, even children of God.”<sup>9</sup>

The point is that advances in communications often empower us to think that we are all we need, that human progress is solely in our hands. It makes it possible for us to think that because we have so much information readily available to us we can indeed play Creator and fashion a virtual world that is the consummation of our hopes and dreams. Now, virtual worlds, where individuals exist and interact among each other as digital avatars of themselves, do indeed exist. But these worlds are merely created worlds upon which the hopes and ideals of the real world are projected. The result, of course, is what Ward describes as an implosion of secularity where “humanism, contractualism, freedom, democracy, liberalism, progress, dialogue, consensus have collapsed upon themselves and, now inverted, are celebrated in and through simulacra.”<sup>10</sup>

#### THE HACKER ETHIC

Yet, the greater disconcert comes from the opposite direction of thought, which is the direct application of post-informational values in the real world. What results is a society whose morality will embody the virtues of the virtual world. The most systematic treatment of those “post-informational virtues” was given by Pekka Himanen, who was able to conceive an entire ethical system drawn from the intellectual milieu that gave birth to the computing revolution in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In his book, *The Hacker Ethic*, Himanen—a computer engineer turned philosopher—was not referring to the hacker as a cyber-criminal, but as a person who perceives the advance of technologies—particularly ones pertaining to computing—as transcendent. Thus, the hacker ethic is fundamentally a non-utilitarian ethical worldview. The computer hackers of the late 20th century in particular were not driven by financial gain or worldly fame, but simply the vision of the endless possibilities that technological progress avails to society. This, coupled with their pure, intense interest and love for their craft, coagulated into the hacker-ethical *Weltanschauung*.

Himanen’s philosophy is interesting because he was not elucidating a philosophy of technology, but also a peculiar philosophy of living and working. Most businesses remunerate employees according to talent, which undergirds the corporate entity with a utilitarian ethic. Workers would engage in work simply because they were being paid for their efforts. Himanen advocated the dismantling of such utilitarianism and duty-boundedness, advocating instead that workers should work purely out of interest for their work. Thus, their craft is their

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8 Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15.

9 Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge Press, 2000), 251.

10 *Ibid.*, 252.

passion, almost their *raison d'être*. Yet, while he restricts his inquiry to business institutions, it is quite evident too that his virtues have wider societal implications as well.

Himanen's hacker ethic is virtue-based, but his virtues are not inspired from Aristotelian or Thomist sources. Just as most virtue ethicists were concerned with the attainment of "the good life", so was Himanen. The virtues of his conception were based off similarities between many well-known hackers of his day, from Linus Torvalds (the creator of the operating system Linux) to Steve Wozniak (a co-founder of Apple Computers, Inc.). Curiously, there are seven virtues, all of which are important in the development of the technological "good life" or, as Himanen termed it, "personal development."<sup>11</sup> However, they can be generally summed up into three.

The first is *determinacy* in which the individual sets a goal for himself or herself, and then proceeds to meet that goal. Himanen, however, stresses that such a determinacy must be augmented with the other three virtues. The individual must also procure the information and skills necessary to meet the goal. A desire to write a software program, for example, must be accompanied by the necessary skills. The second is *efficiency*, which is the effort expended in order to ensure that the goal is met, accounting for changes in circumstances. If the programming language has changed in the course of the project, the individual hacker must be kept abreast of its development and incorporate that into the project. The third is *measurability*, which provides a means whereby progress and goal attainment can be evaluated. So, in the example of programming software, the hacker would regularly test a program to ensure that it is free of errors.<sup>12</sup>

Himanen's hacker ethic is a philosophical step-forward in terms of linking post-informational technologies to the human ethical picture. Yet, it is troublesome because the hacker ethic operates much like any software would; it requires regular updating! Mozilla Firefox, a free internet browser created in 2004 by the Mozilla Foundation, has gone through three major revisions, and many minor updates since. In fact, a fourth revision is currently in its testing phase. Software requires updating because the preferences of the users, as well as the virtual environment where the software is used, change frequently. Likewise, the hacker must continually stay abreast of changes and developments in order to continue pursuing his or her interest. It is in this sense that Himanen describes hackers as "self-programmable workers."<sup>13</sup> Because they are driven by passion for their fields of interest, self-management is necessary so that hackers can efficiently progress towards achieving their self-made goals.

It should not be surprising that the Prometheanism which is evident in Negroponte's appraisal of the post-informational age also holds true with the hacker ethic. Just as the post-informational age emphasizes a "we are all we need" mentality, the hacker ethic places progress solely in the hands of the individual.

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11 Pekka Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic: A Radical Approach to the Philosophy of Business*. (New York: Random House, 2001), 111.

12 Ibid., 114.

13 Ibid., 112.



No longer does he or she need to have some outside motivation—be it religious, financial, or political—in order to live the good life. As long as the individual pursues something of great interest, the good life is made easily accessible with the proper motivation.

#### THE CHURCH AND THE WEB

While discussing the characteristics of the post-informational world, it is worth discussing the way in which the philosophical ethics of both Negroponte and Himanen can be seen in the church today. Douglas Estes, for example, conceived of the virtual world—that is, the digitally created world represented by programs such as Second Life and World of Warcraft—as a missionary frontier. He praised the digital ministry of a few pastors who were able to set up a virtual church in Second Life. Individuals who were represented in the simulator as their virtual avatars would attend church, hear a sermon, and sing songs of praise. Since these individuals do not attend a physical church in person, theoretically these parishioners could “attend church in their pajamas,” or even not needing to leave their beds. Estes praises such innovation, writing that,

The church has been around the block for two thousand years, and our world takes it for granted. As we attempt to engage the post-Christian world with the truth of the gospel, we will need to draw up new blueprints for being the church; it is absolutely necessary that we don’t allow church culture to hold us back from reformulating the church for this time and place.<sup>14</sup>

Such a conception of the church is problematic for two reasons. First of all, such a time and place does not exist in the real world; they are only simulated. Some people, in fact, participate in these simulated worlds because they have encountered disappointment in reality. Thus, these virtual realities are all the more attractive because they offer a refuge from—or, in extreme cases, a replacement of—the world. By starting a “church” within the virtual spheres the church legitimizes a withdrawal ethic instead of offering a real place of sanctuary in the world.

Of course, it is true indeed that there are many who recreationally participate in virtual worlds. But if it indeed is so, then everything in the virtual world is recreational. Exchanges, interactions, and other forms of actions in the virtual world would simply be that. Whether walking into a virtual store to purchase goods or driving a half-dead avatar to the virtual hospital, all activities would be recreational activity, as would attending a church. Thus the church is robbed of her ontological witness; she is denuded of her identity as the God-created and God-shaped institution, and becomes one that is created and shaped by the world. For anything within that virtual world is a creation of the real world. It has no identity apart from it because is simply a human-constructed simulation of reality.

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14 Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 52.

Secondly, Estes' observations do not take into account how the church lives out her witness. The church does not need to reformulate for any time and place to make the Gospel somehow attractive or relevant. The church simply needs to *be* herself. It is through such an ontological living that the post-Christian, and post-informational world can realize the transformative power of the Gospel. To put it differently, accommodating to the world is not a good missional strategy. After all, as Ellen T. Charry reminds us eloquently, "[the church] makes us, we do not make it."<sup>15</sup>

The lack of a robust ecclesiology is, unfortunately, common and costly. Without a sure identity, the church is forced to look for it in the wrong places. Even though they might not publicly identify with it, some have found Himanen's hacker ethic to be a perfect resting place. The virtues of the hacker ethic are inwardly directed, for individuals are able to accomplish their self-ordained goals only through measurable actions that are driven by themselves. In the context of the church—a "hacker church," if you will—is an institution moved by her people, not by the Holy Spirit. It is not a church founded on theological truth, but founded on secular virtues.

Many churches, and even whole denominations, embody these virtues perfectly. Take, for example, a website from the denominational leadership, advocating a 10-step process for church planting by which - if followed correctly - the number of churches can thereby increase.<sup>16</sup> This is a textbook example of a hacker ethic finding context in a church or denominational setting. First of all, the denomination has a goal: church-planting, or more specifically, to increase the number of denominationally-affiliated churches. The means of accomplishing that is to have an efficient process (the ten-step method) in which its success could be measured—in this case—by noting how many new denominational churches have been founded. Again, the focus is on numbers. Apparently, for the denomination, it was more important to have more churches than to ensure that existing churches are faithful in their public witness to their communities.

Without an ecclesiology, the church has no recourse for witness except by doing "stuff." Thus, the church becomes not that much different than a non-profit institution that serves to provide religious services catering to the widest demographic possible. The virtual churches that have drawn praise from Estes are only post-informational versions of such a church strategy, because the simulated churches simply cater to the audience of one. How, then, can the church today have a real witness in a post-informational and sometimes simulated world? Perhaps the ideal starting point is to revisit what the church simply is.

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15 Ellen T. Charry, "Sacramental Ecclesiology," in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel Treier (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 205.

16 The Christian and Missionary Alliance, "Key Biblical X Factors / X Equals Multiplication," *Alliance News & Stories*, August 22, 2006, accessed September 3, 2010, <http://www.cmalliance.org/news/2006/08/22/key-biblical-x-factors-x-equals-multiplication/>.



## THE CHURCH IN A POST-INFORMATIONAL WORLD

The church, properly understood, is created and instituted by God. Ellen T. Charry defines the church as “that body whose identity, vision and mission are constituted by its participation in the work of God in Israel and Jesus Christ.”<sup>17</sup> The church is not the product of her members who somehow effect the will of God by their strength alone. Instead, the church aligns herself with the will of God. It is important to note that this alignment is a deliberate turning away from the self-centered, individualist milieu that is fiercely prevalent today. In fact, a robust ecclesiology and the hacker ethic cannot coexist, for the hacker ethic requires that each person is empowered with the power for self-progress. The church, on the other hand, maintains that such empowerment, especially when aggregated together, is doomed to failure. The Old Testament narratives tell of the Tower of Babel, which was supposed to be the crowning achievement of a people who, having mastered the technology of fired bricks (as opposed to the weaker dried versions), desired to build a great city as a lasting testament to their greatness. God’s foiling of their grand plan was not because of humanity’s potential threat to His authority, but a gracious measure to prevent humans from self-destruction! The hacker ethic insists on the organization or institution as an aggregation of many self-driven people. Importing such an ethic into the life of the church can only lead to schism. Thus, it remains imperative that the church continually safeguard against any notion of self-empowerment, but embody the empowerment that can only be made possible by the Holy Spirit. The non-individualist nature of participation in the church is reinforced by understanding that such participation is more akin to participating in a family than in a voluntary non-profit organization. Once an individual belongs to a family he or she has to participate; there is no withdrawal from the family at will because the individual’s identity is inseparable from that of the family. Furthermore, the identification with the family persists regardless of location. My membership in my family, for instance, does not cease upon exiting the house. Likewise the Christian does not simply “shut off” his or her Christian identity upon exiting the church building, because the individual’s ecclesial identity persists despite shifting locations.

Perhaps that is why virtual worlds such as Second Life and World of Warcraft are so alluring. Participating in those worlds allows the participant to temporarily renounce his or her worldly identity in favor of a new and personally created one. This renunciation is possible because the participant has no reason to import his or her identity into the virtual world. After all, what is the point of having a virtual world if it were no different than the real? Unfortunately for some this virtual world is so much preferable to the real one that they have developed an internet addiction, spending an inordinate amount of time interacting as their virtual avatars in those worlds.

How, then, should the church respond in her witness? Simply this: by living in the reality of the Gospel. Very much unlike Second Life or World of Warcraft, which are opportunities for people to withdraw from the unpleasantness of the

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17 Ellen T. Charry, “Sacramental Ecclesiology,” 214.

real world, the Gospel—the *euangelion*—encapsulates the grim reality of living in this world within the broader narrative of God’s plan as told in the Scriptures. The church, in other words, does not seek to withdraw from the struggles and imperfections of the world, but confronts them with the reality of the Gospel, which—as Stanley Hauerwas writes—is that

The story of God does not offer a resolution of life’s difficulties, but it offers us something better - an adventure and a struggle, for we are possessors of the happy news that God has called people together to live faithful to the reality that he is the Lord of this world.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to realize the centrality of *koinonia* in the church. The most common translation, “fellowship”, has lost most of its original meaning over the course of time. Today the general idea of fellowship centers around the notion of friendship which, while not reprehensible *per se*, is merely a superficial relationship when compared with the biblical intention of “fellowship.” For friendship connotes affinity; one usually makes friends with those whom he or she likes. The theological definition of *koinonia*, on the other hand, entails, as Pope Benedict XVI wrote, a “mutual acceptance, giving and receiving on both sides, and readiness to share one’s goods.”<sup>19</sup> Unlike mere friendship, *koinonia* brings people together selflessly based on a common identity afforded by being members of the body of Christ.

Furthermore, a *koinonia* exists between individuals because they, having heard the good news and owned it, live in the reality that the Lord is king. Thus, *koinonia* flies in the face of the post-informational hacker ethic, not only because such an ethic assumes the kingship of the individual alone, but also because the ethic requires a more-is-better ethic. The church, on the other hand, does not need more purpose-driven programs to cater to smaller audiences within a wider demographic, but she simply needs only to *be* the church. It should be noted that the early nascent church was not known for having programs that catered to the masses, but simply met and ate together “with glad and sincere hearts.”<sup>20</sup>

What, then, is the role of such communications technology within the life of the church? Simply this: to enable all God’s people to live out the Gospel message faithfully on a global scale. Because such technologies have made location no longer an impediment to communication, Christians in a post-informational world can no longer claim ignorance to the plight of brothers and sisters across the globe. Our *koinonia*, in other words, must extend beyond national borders, beyond the confines of our familiar personal circumferences to include international brethren as well.

It is important to note that through such a witness, the church is actively fighting against the inwardness emphasized by post-informational hacker ethics.

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18 Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 149.

19 Joseph Card. Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of the Faith: The Church as Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 69.

20 Acts 2:44-47 (NIV).



That is, the church uses the technology that spawned the hacker ethic not to increase self-reliance and self-worship, but to direct the church's witness outwards. Instead of promoting isolationism, the church can use technology to promote a community that takes *koinonia* seriously. In doing so, she places technology in its proper place: as a tool to be used, instead of as a basis for an ethical system the church cannot accept.

#### WHEN WEB 3.0 ARRIVES...

It has to be said that Web 2.0 has been largely positive for human development. It is extremely useful for individuals within the church to update each other on the goings-on of their lives, in order that *koinonia* may be practiced. Not long ago, a friend of my church had a family emergency, which he posted on Facebook. Within minutes, prayer requests and inquiries about whether he needed help appeared in everybody's e-mail inboxes. Indeed, such advances in technology have enabled Christians to practice *koinonia* regardless of location. Certainly when used within its proper context, technology is a windfall for the church in her private life and public witness.

The argument of the article, however, stays the same: that the communications revolution ushered in by Web 2.0 has, indeed, a dark side to it. While it retains the potential to make the world flat—that is, to draw people regardless of location together in communication—it also presents an alternative worldview for its users. On the surface it certainly looks innocuous, but in actuality it is incompatible with the worldview of the church, for the church is the possessor of the Gospel message and lives its implications out in reality. The post-informational era described by Negroponte and the hacker ethic outlined by Himanen are both premised upon the supreme authority of individuals in determining their own progress and destiny. The church, on the other hand, insists that such authority rests only with God. Furthermore, the church serves as a powerful witness in contrast to the fragmented post-informational world when her members unite and participate together in *koinonia*.

Even now, rumors are circulating that the world is slowly transitioning to a Web 3.0, where computers are able to “read” online information, allowing for users to more precisely locate their desired information.<sup>21</sup> Of course, new informational technologies will once again alter every user's ethical perspective. Yet, so long as the church continues to hold true to the Gospel message, she will continue to be a place of sanctuary for many who will be lost in the sea of information-gathering.

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21 Cade Metz, “Web 3.0,” PC Magazine, March 14, 2007, accessed September 14, 2010, <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2102852,00.asp>.

# THEO-BLOGGING AND THE FUTURE OF ACADEMIC THEOLOGY: REFLECTIONS FROM THE TRENCHES

David Congdon  
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## THE BLOGOSPHERE AS LIMINAL SPACE

The arrival of the Internet and electronic media presents a unique challenge and opportunity for the academy. The world of academia is rightly and necessarily centered on the written word, and until very recently, this was defined by the printing press. The life of a scholar is thus intrinsically bound up with the life of publishing houses—those responsible for the production of books, journals, and the like. The maxim “Publish or Perish!” is typically quantifiable in terms of a certain number of books and peer-reviewed articles published within a specific span of time. Whether rightly or wrongly, the measure of a scholar’s performance is connected to traditional publications—the kind that one can physically hold.

It is certainly not our opinion that the arrival of the Internet, and the blogosphere in particular, demands that the academy abandon traditional (or “hard”) print media. While that may indeed be in the academy’s future, the state of electronic communications has not reached the point where it can fully replace paper publishing. For one thing, digital media is not yet stable enough for serious archival purposes. Moreover, scholars whose work involves poring over ancient manuscripts and works by long-dead authors will likely be resistant—and quite understandably so—to any digital take-over. That’s not to deny the many benefits to scholars afforded by the latest technology. Internet search applications like Google Books and Google Scholar have made research easy and instantaneous, while reference management software like Endnote, Sente, Zotero, and Mendeley make it simple to record bibliographic citations. These technological advances notwithstanding, the world of e-books and online publishing remains incapable of replacing hard print media when it comes to academic scholarship.

Our conviction is this: the academy, and especially academic theology,<sup>1</sup> can make a positive, constructive use of the blogosphere, not to mention the many

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1 While it goes without saying, our analysis is not limited to “theology” *per se*, as if to the exclusion of biblical studies, ethics, philosophy, practical theology, history, etc. The use of “theology” here should not be taken as discipline-specific. Rather, we mean it to include—in the broadest sense possible—the various explorations of God-talk.



other digital tools and applications available. More specifically, blogs ought to function as a kind of “liminal space” for theological research and conversation. The word “liminal” comes from the Latin *limen*, meaning “threshold,” “entrance,” and “border.” This gives the notion of liminality the double connotation of origin and boundary. A liminal space can refer to both a preparatory stage and the outer limits of possibility. It is precisely this double meaning that illuminates the role that blogs can play in contemporary theology.

The temptation for any professional scholar is to find one or two great ideas and then put the mind into “cruise control,” so to speak. To counter this, the academy places pressure on professors to publish. This accomplishes two primary purposes: it forces scholars (a) to demonstrate *mastery* of their field’s essential literature and *competency* in the most recent literature and (b) to provisionally explore new ideas. These are both important goals. As professor and active blogger Alan Jacobs puts it, “Without publish-or-perish, there’s some danger that teachers will spend their careers placidly recycling what they learned in graduate school, without ever having to reckon with new knowledge and new approaches.”<sup>2</sup>

Both of these tasks—mastery-competency and exploration—continue to demand traditional forms of scholarly work. And yet today we face a number of problems with and pressures on the established system. Currently, the way to demonstrate mastery-competency is through journal articles, chapters in edited volumes and, most importantly, single-author monographs. Though it is worth discussing on its own, we cannot touch here on all the issues—economic, environmental, technological—facing the publishing industry.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the

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2 Alan Jacobs, “Too Much Research,” *Text Patterns*, June 29, 2010, <http://text-patterns.thenewatlantis.com/2010/06/too-much-research.html>.

3 To put it briefly, publishers are facing a time of transition. In an era of cost-cutting in every industry, publishers are finding it much cheaper (and more lucrative) to produce e-books, and many academic journals are moving to online formats as their primary form of publication. The logic here is not only economical but also environmental. This digital move has a number of consequences, which are very different for books and journals.

First, books: because academic books are not served well by e-book platforms—scholars generally want to be able to mark up their texts and have multiple sources open and available for research—the academy has remained largely absent from the recent e-book frenzy. This, combined with the limited audience of such works, has resulted in extraordinarily high prices for many scholarly texts. The result is that these works become even less accessible than they already were. For the sake of Christian theology’s reach beyond the privileged walls of academic libraries, one hopes that e-book readers will find a way to more adequately suit the needs of professors and students.

The situation for academic journals is markedly different. While journal publishers face the same economic difficulties, it is fairly easy to transition to an online-only format. This brings a number of advantages. For starters, it is significantly cheaper, saves paper, and allows for instant, global access. It also eliminates the problem of length, in that there is no longer any need to restrict articles to a set number of words, or journal issues to a set number of pages. Moreover, it increases potential readership, since journals are no longer restricted to library reading rooms. But these advantages also give rise to a serious disadvantage: because of the ease with which a journal can publish new

most relevant problem presently is the fact that, as Jacobs notes, there is simply “too much research.” As he puts it, “Too much of what is published is of poor quality, and most published research is ignored by the scholars’ peers.” Too many academic publishing houses are accepting unrevised, unedited dissertations and putting them into publication at exorbitant prices to be paid by university libraries. Too many journals publish poorly written articles that fail to make a cogent case for an interesting thesis. This crisis is largely built on the pressure felt by graduate students and young professors to “make a name for themselves” in the academy and thus to secure tenure. Here the publish-or-perish maxim is largely to blame: “How good is work likely to be that is done, not for the love of it or out of passionate curiosity, but at metaphorical gunpoint?”<sup>4</sup>

In addition to mastery-competency, scholars need to engage in novel exploration and experimentation. The traditional way to accomplish this is not only through shorter publications (e.g., journal articles), but also through conference presentations. This latter form of academic work faces its own set of pressures, though, including the rising cost of travel, scheduling difficulties, and many time constraints. By “time constraints,” we mean not only those that limit who can attend conferences, but also the constraints in the conferences themselves: for example, competing sessions at large conferences (such as SBL and AAR), the restriction on the length of papers, and the fact that there is often very little time for others to raise questions and criticisms in response.

Again, we raise these issues not because they signal a need to depart from the traditional formats of academic scholarship altogether. Rather, they open the door to the proper use of technology, especially the blogosphere. We will touch on the specific benefits of blogs later. Here we only wish to highlight the need for a liminal space in the academy. Such a space could address the need to demonstrate mastery-competency and explore tentative new ideas by functioning as both a preparatory staging ground (“entrance”) and an outer limit of experimentation (“border”). Blogs can be an academic “threshold” in this double sense for both aspects of scholarly work. On the one hand, they can be an entrance-point by allowing theologians and other scholars to sketch new ideas and offer initial reflections on recent literature in the field. On the other hand, they can be a boundary-zone or a limit-space (for lack of a better term) in which a person can probe the outer reaches of one’s field without needing to produce a fully-formed,

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articles, there is much less incentive to enforce strict quality control. The result tends to be oversaturation, lack of adequate editing, and too many poorly-argued, poorly-written articles. Of course, there are measures a journal can take to prevent this, but such are the potential dangers of moving a journal online.

For more on the possibilities of online journals, see Adam Kotsko’s recent blog post, “Online journals,” *An und für sich*, August 30, 2010, <http://itself.wordpress.com/2010/08/30/online-journals>. Kotsko makes the excellent point that online journals have thus far failed to actualize their potential because of “the self-imposed limitation of imitating the ‘journal issue’ format.” On this point—i.e., the actualization of potential—e-books have largely succeeded where online journals have not.

4 Jacobs, “Too Much Research.”



journal-ready argument. In both aspects—as entrance and border—blogs can assist scholars in their ongoing research and constructive work. They can be used for reviewing and discussing current literature, briefly probing a subtle point in the area of a scholar’s expertise, or provisionally exploring new or tangentially-related territory.

Our basic point is that blogs are neither non-academic diversions from true scholarly work nor replacements for the traditional forms of academic communication and publication. Instead, blogs ought to be seen as a liminal space that does not compete with the already-occupied spaces of academic scholarship, but instead strengthens and enriches the “old” modes of intellectual engagement. In this way, blogs may become a fertile, creative threshold for theological—but not only theological—research and dialogue.

In what follows we will discuss in concrete detail the weaknesses and strengths of blogging as a medium for scholarly work. We will conclude with a brief discussion of the future of theological blogging and what the blogosphere might mean for research and teaching.

#### WEAKNESSES

As with any form of communication, blogs have their weaknesses. Perhaps the most significant of these is the general perception that blogging does not constitute serious scholarship. Of course, whether this is true depends on one’s understanding of what counts as “serious scholarship.” This is a big topic and need not be explored extensively here. It suffices to say, as was noted previously, that it is unreasonable to expect blogs to replace traditional scholarly publication. The medium simply does not intrinsically encourage the sort of depth and precision that traditional scholarly publication requires. People who read blogs are not looking for that sort of material, and even trying to publish that material on a blog is prohibitive for those who might want to read it: How many of us are interested in scrolling down through a 6000+ word blog post? None of this suggests that blogs cannot provide the sort of liminal scholarly space mapped out above; rather, it acknowledges one boundary of that space as a real and important boundary. Furthermore, this boundary requires recognition not merely due to inherited ideas about what constitutes scholarly publication. Blogs themselves, and an honest assessment of their limits as a particular medium, require this acknowledgment.

Closely associated with this, another weakness of blogs is the lack of quality control. One must admit, of course, that traditional avenues of scholarly publication often make poor quality control judgments despite complicated peer-review processes. Propriety prevents the elucidation of particular cases, but anyone who has spent time in the academy will have their own mental catalog of materials that—at best—should have been thoroughly revised before going to print. This notwithstanding, blogs are suspect as a group because they lack quality control processes beyond the whims of a particular author who, motivated either by agreement or disagreement, hastily composes and publishes a blog post or comment. As any reader of blogs knows, blog comments generally tend to lack the civility, charity, and intellectual sophistication necessary to engage in a

productive dialogue. Moreover, there are the unfortunate additional problems of spam comments and so-called “trolling.”<sup>5</sup> There are at least two simple strategies for dealing with these issues and raising the quality of a blog’s content: (1) blog owners can enable comment moderation in order to weed out comments that do not contribute in a constructive fashion; (2) bloggers can join forces to produce a single blog, combining their expertise and discernment, and thereby elevating the quality of their published material.

As it happens, one can also deploy these two strategies to combat another blog weakness, namely, the way in which they can become time-intensive. This is especially true when one’s blog has developed regular interlocutors—whether they are other bloggers or frequent commenters. Furthermore, it is very easy to become enthralled by the amount of traffic one receives. Since the easiest way to drive up traffic volume is to post frequently, spending time on your blog can become almost addictive (“If I just stay up late to write one more post, I might break my previous weekly traffic record!”). If one moderates comments, however, one is free to respond to the good comments on one’s own timetable, and to ignore those that do not deserve attention. Further, if one participates in a group blog with other authors, the pressure to produce content frequently and regularly is diminished.

Blogging’s almost addictive quality highlights another weakness of the medium. Blogging all too easily becomes ego-driven. It can be very self-satisfying to publish one’s thoughts, to make them public, and to see them discussed by others. More alluring still is when people like what you write. The flow of traffic can stroke one’s ego with great seductive power. Spurred on by a cacophony of praise—or even the sound of two hands clapping—one begins all too easily to assume that one has a valuable “message” to get out to one’s “audience.” Heaven help us theology bloggers if we begin to think of them as our “congregation”! Team blogging can help mitigate this tendency, but that is not a foolproof strategy. Unfortunately, there is no foolproof strategy to avoid this danger. Being aware of it, however, is half the battle. The only remedy is to remember one’s own humanity, that one has not in fact read everything and thought every thought, and that the God we serve is ultimately far beyond any of our foolish, dogmatic certainty.

Conveniently enough—or not—this is also the only strategy to avoid blogging’s final (for our purposes) weakness. Just as blogging can stroke the author’s ego, it can stroke that of readers as well. Part of the Internet’s nature is that it encourages self-selection. Cable TV serves as an analogy here. Before the advent of cable TV, there were a very limited number of national networks who served as media gatekeepers. If you wanted the news, or the weather, you had to tune into one of those networks. Consequently, the considered opinions of the news anchor or weatherperson directly influenced your own. But with the advent of cable TV, one was suddenly able to seek out—whether consciously or unconsciously—those sources that tended to agree with one’s own viewpoint.

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5 Spam comments are when people use a comment to leave an advertisement on a blog. Trolling is the intentional antagonism of others on the Internet.



Blogs replicate this phenomenon exponentially. One does not tend to seek out and regularly read blogs that challenge one's cherished positions. If a blog develops a following, it is because readers like what they find there. Given enough time, this dynamic influences the blog's author. Just as the readers stroke the author's ego, the author is increasingly compelled to stroke the readers' egos.

If one is to be a good blogger—not a successful blogger, but a virtuous one—one must recognize these weaknesses and the dynamics that feed into them, and self-consciously address them. Some strategies for avoiding and compensating for these weaknesses were suggested above, but nothing compensates for reflection. Socrates famously said that the unreflective life is not worth living. Just so, an unreflective blog is not worth reading—or writing!

### STRENGTHS

Despite their weaknesses, blogs have a number of unique and important strengths. The first and most obvious strength is their immediacy. Blogs allow scholars to respond instantly to new literature. Traditional book reviews must enter a journal's publication pipeline and may not see print until a year or more after the review was written. And while most journals try to review books only from the past two or three years, some journals stretch that to four or five years, if not more. By contrast, blogs allow for immediate feedback and dialogue about the latest scholarship in one's field. A blogger is free to write a polished review worthy of journal publication, or she can take a very different approach. For major new publications, some bloggers choose to do a series of posts which explore the work in-depth (e.g., chapter-by-chapter).<sup>6</sup> A more casual approach is also helpful. That might include simply posting some key quotes or writing a few notes on the book's thesis. The advantage of a blog is that any and all of these methods of engagement are acceptable; a person is not limited to an established form of review and discussion.

In addition to the instant and creative assessment of new literature, there is also the ability to carry on discussion and debate through comments. By setting a strict policy of online civility, the author of a blog can establish a culture of thoughtful dialogue among those who regularly read and comment on the site. If such parameters are set, then blogs can be an especially useful tool for scholarly debate. We noted above the fact that academic conferences are the traditional place for engaging in dialogue and debate with one's colleagues. Blogs allow for similar dialogue without the restrictions of time and place: anyone in the world can comment at any time. This significantly increases the potential diversity of online discussions. To put it simply, the Internet democratizes intellectual conversation.<sup>7</sup>

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6 For a good example of this, see Chris Tilling's detailed review of Richard Bauckham's book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*: "The Jesus and the Eyewitnesses series," *Chrisendom*, August 9, 2007, <http://www.christilling.de/blog/2007/08/jesus-and-eyewitnesses-series.html>.

7 It is this democratization of the academy that is causing established journals to rethink the peer review process. As reported recently in the *New York Times*, the journal *Shakespeare Quarterly* recently experimented with opening up the review process to

It frees academic confabulations from the restrictions of scheduled lectures and conferences.

A third strength is found in the concise and flexible character of blog posts. Some criticize blogs for being too informal and non-scholarly, due to the fact that they encourage short, simple posts instead of the carefully-researched, densely-footnoted sort of writing that tends to be categorized as “academic.” Yet it is precisely this aspect that makes them useful for academic work. While journal articles and monographs are subject to specific formal standards, blogs allow a person to engage ideas in a piecemeal fashion. Moreover, the online format—properly embraced—can help restrain the academic tendency toward prolixity. The result is that blogs provide a space for provisionally engaging concepts and arguments in succinct, creative ways. Many problems do not warrant a journal-length treatment; a simple paragraph or two would suffice. And even if a problem did warrant a longer, more formal assessment, it can be immensely helpful for a person to receive feedback on an aspect of one’s argument before publishing the full piece. In general, while the lack of any enforced standards can undoubtedly lead to many poorly-written and misinformed blogs, it can also free a scholar for new possibilities in the exploration and examination of issues in her field.

Speaking of new possibilities, another crucial strength of the online medium is the sheer wealth of information available on the Internet. One of the unique characteristics of blogs and online journals is the ability to link to a vast array of content. Instead of a mere footnote, one can often link directly to the page of the book in question through a service like Google Books. At the very least, one can display a picture of the work and link to its product page on a site like Amazon.com. Instead of simply referencing a lecture or an interview, one can often link to the actual audio or video of that occasion.

Finally, because blogs democratize intellectual dialogue, they provide a significant bridge between academic theology and the educated laity. As everyone is well aware, the gulf between the church and the academy has steadily widened over the decades to such an extent that academic theology is generally viewed as elitist and irrelevant to the concrete problems of local communities. While this situation is based on a number of complex factors and misunderstandings on both sides, a major problem is simply the issue of accessibility. Books and journals are often expensive and hard to come by, and it goes without saying that lectures

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the web by allowing people to comment on new articles: “[Some humanities scholars] argue that in an era of digital media there is a better way to assess the quality of work. Instead of relying on a few experts selected by leading publications, they advocate using the Internet to expose scholarly thinking to the swift collective judgment of a much broader interested audience.” See Patricia Cohen, “Scholars Test Web Alternative to Peer Review,” *New York Times*, August 23, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/24/arts/24peer.html>. Cf. Alan Jacobs, “Iron Sharpens Iron,” *Text Patterns*, August 26, 2010, <http://text-patterns.thenewatlantis.com/2010/08/iron-sharpens-iron.html>. It remains an open question whether the review process undertaken by *Shakespeare Quarterly* represents an advance upon the current system, but it is certainly time to begin rethinking such matters.



and conferences are limited to those with the time, money, and prerequisite knowledge. The blogosphere—and, in this case, specifically the so-called “theo-blogs”—provide a non-threatening, easily accessible point of contact between the academy and the wider world. If used properly, these online sites can become a way for professors to engage students, ministers, and educated laypersons in thoughtful theological dialogue. They are no substitute for sustained reflection upon published texts, but (to reiterate our main point) they offer a liminal space for such reflection.

In general, the strength of the blog for academic scholarship centers on the ability to creatively and provisionally explore new ideas, reflect on contemporary issues, and assess the latest literature in one’s field. As we stated at the start of this article, blogs ought to function as a threshold for this kind of work: they provide a starting-point and a limit-space for these scholarly tasks. While traditional forms of scholarship are essential and irreplaceable, it is also clear that online media can serve the academy in unique ways as well. The ability to interact instantly with new literature and ideas, real-time dialogue with colleagues, creative and flexible formats, myriad sources of information and media content, and easy global access—all are examples of ways that blogs can assist the work of the academic, especially in the fields of theology and religious studies.

#### WHAT DOES THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

Now that we have mapped out the sort of liminal space for reflection that blogs supply, as well as drawn attention to a number of the medium’s weaknesses and strengths, it is time to ask the crucial question: Whither theology blogging? It is always difficult to predict the future, but it is possible to venture an educated guess. Furthermore, it is possible to provide recommendations for the direction in which theology blogs ought to go. Here, then, are four trends that deserve highlighting and emulating.

First, blogs are beginning to function as theological think-tanks, and it is a safe bet that they will increasingly become so in a formal sense. Group blogs are the most obvious and formal way in which this “think-tank” posture is assumed. Indeed, this terminology is sometimes found in a blog’s title, such as the now defunct *Generous Orthodoxy Think-Tank* blog. But, single-author blogs can also function informally as think-tanks. One need only peruse the comments at a popular theology blog like *Faith & Theology* or *Inhabitatio Dei* to discover that each boasts a core of regular, committed readers.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it will become apparent that these readers influence the blog’s primary author—posts are often devoted to expanding on something encountered in the comments section—thus enabling a single-author blog to function collaboratively. Recognition and formalization of how these blogs function is the only lack. As this trend continues, look for such “think-tanks” to begin publishing electronic journals as a way to

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8 Cf., respectively: <http://faith-theology.blogspot.com>, <http://www.inhabitatio-dei.com>.

further bridge the gap between traditional scholarly publication and the more informal, creative, liminal work of theology blogging.

Second, recognizing and harnessing the impulse to formalize the collaboration that takes place on theology blogs, some bloggers have begun organizing “blog conferences.” The present authors have been trail-blazers on this front, hosting both the annual *Karl Barth Blog Conference*—now in its fourth year—and the 2008 *Hans Urs von Balthasar Blog Conference*.<sup>9</sup> Other notable blog conferences include the *Trinity Blogging Summit*, now in its third year.<sup>10</sup> Such blog conferences see participation not just from other bloggers, but can also include more established scholars as well.

Blog conferences are leaders in another theology blogging trend, namely, turning blogging into more traditional scholarly publication. We might say that the blog-to-book phenomenon is coming to theology blogs. Wipf & Stock Publishers is helping to pioneer this trend, with multiple blog-to-book projects under contract—including publication of the revised and expanded proceedings of the 4th annual *Karl Barth Blog Conference*. As theology blogs up the ante in terms of collaboration, and begin to produce more creative and materially significant content, watch for more traditional publishers to take notice and get on board.

Fourth and finally, for the present analysis, blogs are increasingly being incorporated into teaching. There are generally two ways that this can be done: one might assign students to post their thoughts for comment from their fellow students in a closed network system, or one might assign students to publish a regular, public blog. Each of these methods has its own challenges and dangers.<sup>11</sup> One particularly important aspect to think about as an instructor is whether or not you will do your “grading” in the comments section on the student’s blog. Just how public should that sort of pedagogy be? Still, it may be that younger generations of students are more familiar with this form of writing and will find it a helpful segue into more sustained scholarly reflection. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that blogs will become an increasingly important tool in the pedagogical tool-box.<sup>12</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Christianity is, of course, a “religion of the book,” and theology is the ongoing reflection on ancient and modern texts. But the challenge today is to understand how the church and the theological academy ought to adapt to new media in the so-called “Internet Age.” Our proposal here is a modest one: the

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9 Cf., respectively: <http://derevth.blogspot.com/2010/03/kbbc-index.html>, <http://fireandrose.blogspot.com/2008/03/official-2008-balthasar-blog-conference.html>.

10 Cf. <http://rdtwot.wordpress.com/2010/05/30/2010-trinity-blogging-summit>.

11 For one recent discussion, see Lanny Arvan, “Teaching With Blogs,” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 27, 2010, <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/07/27/arvan>.

12 For further reflections on theological blogging, see Ben Myers, “Theology 2.0: Blogging as Theological Discourse,” *Cultural Encounters* 6, no. 1 (2010): 47-60; cf. also Robb Redman’s response (*ibid.*, 61-3).



church and academy both have much to gain from the prudent use of blogs as vehicles for theological reflection. They are not a panacea, and they are no substitute for the traditional forms of scholarly work—just as e-books are no replacement for a tangible, bound volume. Nevertheless, they have a place within contemporary scholarship as a liminal space for the review of current ideas and literature, the promotion of collegial dialogue, and the exploration of new possibilities in theological discourse.

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# THEOLOGICAL BLOGGING: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

Brian Brock

The internet is volatilizing and reconfiguring political life in late-modern highly-developed societies. If Christian theology gives us any critical purchase on the cultural developments that surround and shape us, it will thus need to make its insights felt here. We tend to assume that the internet and the various communication gadgets that go along with it are just tools, something we pick up or put down at will. While behavioral psychologists and neuroscientists have only recently begun to question this assumption in earnest, philosophers have been doing so for some time. George Grant, to take one example, has remarked, “Seventy five years ago somebody might have said ‘The automobile does not impose on us the ways it should be used’, and who would have quarreled with that? Yet this would have been a deluded representation of the automobile.”<sup>1</sup> Our habitual ways of thinking of technology as a neutral tool reveals a problem at the heart of the modern way of thinking. Grant concludes,

“The computer does not impose on us the ways it *should* be used” asserts the essence of the modern view, which is that human ability freely determines what happens. It then puts that freedom in the service of the very ‘should’ which that same modern novelty has made provisional. The resolute mastery to which we are summoned in ‘does not impose’... therefore cushions us from the full impact of the novelties it asks us to consider<sup>2</sup>

In this essay I want to consider the world of the internet as one forum in which the church suffers the techniques of the age and so begins to bring them into its powers of description. Because it lives in an age of transition from the book to the screen, as it wrestles with the implications of this shift for its own life it gains critical purchase on the cultural shifts that unsettle it.

My aim is to query the ways these new communication technologies are reshaping the church’s patterns of communion. My discussion will orbit around two questions: what would it mean for the church to pursue worship in cyberspace? And, how might the church assess the role of internet communication in training future pastors and theological educators? Anything the church might have to say

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1 George Grant, “Thinking About Technology,” in *Technology and Justice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) 24-25.

2 Ibid., 31-33.



in general about the technologies that make up the internet will be learned as it asks particular questions of this kind. It will not have the resources to assess the worth of the internet as a whole without many more detailed engagements with, and immersion in, its many cultural effects. Only as the church gains this hard-won knowledge can it witness to the gospel in an internet culture. My interest is in allowing the semantics of ecclesial life and the imperatives of reconciliation, mutual representation, and ecclesial discernment as found in the political theology of Bernd Wannenwetsch to orient theological judgments about trajectories in our late-modern cultural context. As I do so, it will be important to watch how our understanding of *both* the church's current configuration and the internet are judged and deepened in the process. My treatment will point out several pitfalls of theological blogging, but conclude by suggesting how communication via cyberspace might be understood to serve the church in limited ways.

### SUNG, READ, AND SCREENED THEOLOGY

I draw on Wannenwetsch's work because his emphasis on worship as a form of communion mediated via the canon is an attempt to recover for contemporary theology the precedence of hearing and speaking to God from within the living throng of saints. This position is a corrective to modern theology at the end of the print age. That theology is heir to a theologically problematic shift from monastic or "sung" theology to scholastic or "bookish" theology. The patristic era's rule for theology, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, "the law of praying is the law of thinking," marks what was lost in this transition. Wannenwetsch is recovering theology conceived as expressing in a different idiom the grammar of praise and prayer, in so doing granting the given language of liturgy, its songs, prayers and lectionary, conceptual precedence.

This move directs attention to the patristic church's emphasis on worship as a calling on and singing praise to Christ. The theology of liturgical performance was devoted essentially to proclaiming the Lord. This had a wide range of practical implications. For instance, in the western monastic tradition, the term "Psalter" did not primarily refer to a book of 150 psalms, but to a textually formed performance of collective worship. In this form of collective worship human affections were energized and aligned by taking up the words of past saints, not primarily by theoretical reason or contemplation. In worship Christians understood themselves to be joining in the worship of the whole eschatological City of God, comprised of all the saints (and angels) past and present. The rule *lex orandi, lex credendi* thus encapsulates the impulse of the earliest Christian theologians to ensure that silly or heretical claims about the trinitarian God were submitted to testing in the "echo chamber" of the universal church and the heavenly choir of angels as they praised God.<sup>3</sup>

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3 This paragraph summarizes Bernd Wannenwetsch, "Singen und Sagen: Zur musisch-musikalischen Dimension der Theologie," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionswissenschaft* 42, (2004): 330-336.

The church fathers felt liberated to dispense with the complicated technologies of memorization popular in late antiquity because they understood liturgy as their pedagogue; in it they were impregnated in a very bodily way, in the shaping of their affect, will, and rationality by the Word of Christ. Within these presuppositions, reading—especially reading scripture—is understood as an act expressing a desire to be possessed by this Word, to have one’s affections reoriented, not to possess or manipulate what has been handed down. Likewise, the purpose for which the congregation assembles is to be re-membered, to become conscious of the faith of the *communio sanctorum*.<sup>4</sup>

The rise of theology as a bookish discipline coincided with the dispersal of this self-understanding of the church. Just before—but paving the way for—scholastic theology (around 1120 CE), Hugh of St. Victor was an early advocate for moving away from this liturgical form of memory toward memory as a carefully constructed archive of wisdom contained in the individual’s mind. He offered instead a recovery of Greek technologies of memory and espoused new techniques of reading that displaced the liturgical time of synchronic and diachronic simultaneity for a primary understanding of time as a historical sequence. In so doing individual reading was rendered the paradigmatic form of worship.<sup>5</sup> A new ecclesial self is born that reads to “discover himself in the mirror of the parchment.”<sup>6</sup>

For the first time the *communality* of theology and so its *social engagement* is rendered a problem. Because ...*lectio divina* is always a liturgical act *coram*, in the face of someone,—God, angels or anyone within earshot... there was no need, in the time between Benedict and Bernard, to insist on the social responsibility of the reader... Fifty years after Hugh, typically, this is no longer true. The technical activity of deciphering no longer creates an auditory and therefore social space.<sup>7</sup>

I will suggest that it is the loss of this experience of eschatological union in time and space that fuels inchoate contemporary attempts to recover some of the simultaneity of theology as liturgy. If true, these are secular attempts to reconstruct a substitute for liturgical memory, an alienated yearning for the *kairos* in which all the saints are gathered. To make such a bold claim raises important questions about modern theology. To what extent can it any longer even comprehend the rule of *lex orandi, lex credendi*? Do modern theologians see themselves as *expressing* the whole church’s desire to praise God in the present *as a way of* joining the praise of the saints of all ages? Were this the case, they would be beyond the distinction between theory and practice and would not be trapped by the problem of *finding* a relationship between the two.<sup>8</sup>

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4 Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh’s “Didascalicon”* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993), 43-44.

5 Ibid., 45-50.

6 Ibid., 23.

7 Ibid., 82.

8 Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 34-37.



The theologies of Wannenwetsch and the fathers have suggested theological development with a very different contour. In their view, theology does not aspire to be creative in thinking “new” thoughts nor in its achievement of a supposed balance between form and creativity. Its true creativity is to serve the transference of canonical images and metaphors from past generations into the present, their “creative elaboration in particular circumstances,”<sup>9</sup> suggests Wannenwetsch. To return to patient rediscovery of the wisdom of patristic theology is thus not an act of nostalgia, but an attempt to regain sight of the essential components of theological activity amidst a church seeking renewal from the depredations of routines of management and managed communion.

These considerations compel us to revisit a question to which western culture has recently returned for very different reasons: “What exactly is reading?”<sup>10</sup> This must finally be a theological question. The developments in the culture of western theology I have just sketched suggest the following answer. Reading is a forum in which we submit ourselves to others. We *read* others in order to hear their living *voices*. Such an account seems inescapably anachronistic to the mind trained to interact with a screen where one trolls, comments, surfs, or buys; one does not submit to being captured by another voice as they choose to present themselves. I recently talked to a professor of medicine who said that he encouraged students to have their computers open on the desk in lectures as it allowed them to “tune in to what they were interested in” and to “look up unfamiliar terms” or “check the accuracy of what they were hearing.” Whether or not this is what students were doing on-line during lectures (and my observations suggest that they would much rather keep up with their friends on Facebook), I suggested that theology seek to train students in a different sort of listening, one that is not content to sift, pick, and choose from the outset, but to listen, understand, assimilate, and then, ideally, critically tease apart. The teacher of theology is not herself demanding this undivided attention, but scripture and the communion of saints who have handed it on to us.

Reading the fathers, medievals and reformers takes time, as does worship and listening to other congregants. To observe this is to set the concept of reading within the concept of entering a theological tradition, a worshipping community. Every time we do so, we are forced to accommodate ourselves to the communicative *forms* in which we encounter each of these people’s long and unwieldy treatises full of unfamiliar cultural assumptions in the one case, and the (often) inconvenient and time consuming interruption of our plans on the other or our difficulties in comprehending others’ unfamiliar ways of articulating themselves. If we want to be with other Christians—if we want to be formed by them—we have to listen to them as they have presented themselves.

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9 Bernd Wannenwetsch, “Die Ökonomie des Gottesdienstes—eine Alternative zum Gestaltungsparadigma im liturgischen Handeln,” in *Evangelisches Gottesdienstbuch und Kirchenrecht: Beiträge zur Liturgie und Spiritualität*, ed. Jörg Neijenhuis (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002), 52.

10 Christine Rosen, “People of the Screen,” *The New Atlantis* 22, (Fall 2008): 25.

The theology that asks how God is claiming and confronting the present worshipping community amidst all its foibles must be a patient and attentive discipline. The forms, restrictions, and slowness of communities of scholarship that teach us to read and so hear the saints are not a hindrance to that attentiveness to God and neighbor that takes the form of thought. Rather, they make it fruitful. God's Word strikes home in a moment, but the work of attentive learning to hear the Cappidocians, to take one example, and the description and living out of what God reveals in this forum, is an extended labor of patient and faithful attentiveness. Christian faith lives and changes—or better, changes its hearers—as its tradition and scriptures become a living rule in the flow of life. This is a slow process of repentant *rethinking* in the context of a communal self-presentation to God, a repentance that dampens the value of unreflective opinion. Such theological sensibilities stand in stark contrast to current web culture in which thought is more valuable when more simultaneous or when an unlimited number of voices participate.

### IS THE THEOLOGICAL BLOGGER THE BEGINNING OF A NEW CHURCH?

In order to develop wider analytical purchase on the cultural shift that is the internet, I will concentrate my discussion on the web log, popularly known as the “blog.” In this electronic forum users post comments or commentary on current events, often on a daily basis, in a style reminiscent of a diary. Among those with uninterrupted access to the highly developed technology and infrastructure that sustains it, this is, by all accounts, a cultural form that is here to stay, with many millions of bloggers writing each day. Very little theological work has been done on if one can or how one is to live as a Christian in this new but influential and rapidly expanding subculture.<sup>11</sup> In this case church practice has run well ahead of its theological thought, and having already drawn in and shaped Christian self-understanding, I suggest that the time is right to attempt to make the underlying grammars of these practices more apparent.

Internet communication is a development in extant patterns of communion and communication that emphasizes the rapidity of written speech and deemphasizes physical presence, although with results that may surpass our expectations. Some Christians have enthusiastically greeted this change as a harbinger of new modes of communion, and proponents of cyberchurch have suggested that in blogging and other online activities, “two or three” are in fact gather in more meaningful and transformational ways than is possible in traditional forms of ecclesial gathering.<sup>12</sup> Even mainstream ecclesial movements

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11 Of this trickle of theological reflection on the topic, I have found most useful Justin Bailey, “Welcome to the Blogosphere” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer, Charles Anderson, and Michael Sleasman (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), ch. 8. For a brief survey of the international and ecumenical discussion, see Leonardo De Chirico, “Internet, Culture and the Church,” *European Journal of Theology* 17, no.2 (2008): 148-151.

12 “As bloggers, we take an active role in our personal spiritual formation. We take seriously Paul’s admonition to participate: “When you come together, everyone has



are being attracted to the claim that the simultaneity of communion developed by constant texting and e-mailing is a better index of the quality of the church's communion than simple physical gathering.<sup>13</sup> Some churches encourage texting and other electronic communications between pastor and congregation within services of worship to make them "more interactive."<sup>14</sup> As the apostle Paul at least had no qualms projecting his presence through letters, the most advanced communication technology of his day (Col 2:1, 5), perhaps Christians ought to prepare themselves for a reorganization of the ecclesia as it embraces these new modes of communication?

Read sympathetically, blogging can be seen as a cultural form in which society—and increasingly the church—seeks a space in which the word can be trusted under the often accurate perception that neither churchly nor secular authorities are listening.<sup>15</sup> Evidence suggests that relationships of trust and respect can develop in these extended and diffuse conversations. In a world increasingly characterized by manipulated communication, Justin Bailey astutely observes that blogging represents a quest for genuine communication. In it, a healthy critical awareness of manipulative communicative techniques sometimes develops.<sup>16</sup>

Any accurate judgment of the wisdom of immersing the church more deeply in internet culture depends not only on a theology and ethos of communion, but also on an awareness of the dominant grammars of cyberspace. This community, for instance, is often strongly marked by antipathy to all political authority.<sup>17</sup> The internet community often understands itself to be achieving truth through decentralization and the undermining of the old forms of authority represented by the disciplinary society described by Michel Foucault. The "hacker" or the internet startup profiteer reincarnates the American pioneer spirit so characteristic

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a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church." As we blog, we push the boundaries of what Martin Luther meant when he wrote about the "priesthood of all believers". . . . In the process of blogging, we have discovered that our emerging network is smarter, more responsive and more creative than our churches, pastors and denominations. Tim Bednar, "We Know More Than Our Pastors: Why Bloggers Are the Vanguard of the Participatory Church," (PDF file, accessed February 29, 2008), <http://djchuang.googlepages.com/WeKnowMoreThanOurPastors.pdf>. 3, 39.

13 Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 88-89.

14 This has become a regular feature at influential churches in the "emerging church" movement in the United States, such as Mars Hill Church in Seattle; Cf. <http://www.marshillchurch.org/>.

15 Bailey, "Welcome to the Blogosphere," 182.

16 Ibid., 177.

17 Cf. AnnaLee Saxenian, *Regional Advantage: Culture and Competition in Silicon Valley and Route 128* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). For one journalist's inside account of the connections between high-tech computing culture and libertarian ideologies, see Paulina Borsook, *Cyberselfish: A Critical Romp Through the Terribly Libertarian Culture of High Tech* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 2000).

of cultures of innovation.<sup>18</sup> Protestant Christians are often especially attracted to this spirit of innovation, and this pioneering spirit often attracts Christian bloggers.<sup>19</sup> Those in the vanguard of this movement have gone as far as to suggest the replacement of the church council with a rolling conversation among the priesthood of all believers, on the grounds that egalitarianism and simultaneity are the prime marks of true discourse.<sup>20</sup> Are we right, then, to affirm that the technology of the internet undermines the old conception of churchly authority structures? Might it break down and enliven old stale habits of the church, especially of its theologians?

#### BLOGGING: PUBLICITY, DISPLAY AND SPEED

Two initial theological queries of the blog culture as it currently exists will give us better access to the appropriate questions here. The first regards the will to display that characterizes blogging culture and which is tied to its architectural features. Blogging is a form of writing that promises to generate instantaneous reader responses. As such, it invites obsession with the number of readers—a temptation to all writers in a post-printing press age—but one accelerated in a forum that is technically geared to provide instantaneous feedback on numbers of readers and relative ranking and assessment. One may, for instance, read the runaway success of blog platforms like “MySpace,” with their emphasis on virtual self-description, driven in no small part by a widespread internalized desire for individual meaning or presence interpreted within the dominant understanding of publicity as reality. Blogging, with its invariable interest in displaying the author’s tastes and opinions, therefore appears as a relatively unsurprising forum for the extension of the well-developed culture of individualist expressivism in which identity is established by the display of a carefully chosen constellation of tastes and affinities for consumer products or types of entertainment.<sup>21</sup> This is expressivism that can only be accelerated as it merges with a modern media society in which publicity has been integrated into the techniques of governance, in which presidents and governments can be elected or overthrown by movements fomented on-line.

The problem here is a political one. Any hypertrophy of display in communication is inimical to hearing and so to consensus building.<sup>22</sup> For instance,

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18 Bernd Wannenwetsch, “Cyberwirklichkeit—glaubensfeindlich?” *Nachrichten der Evang.-Luth. Kirche in Bayern* 51 (1996) 186-188.

19 Alan Jacobs, “Goodbye, Blog: The Friend of Information but the Enemy of Thought,” *Books and Culture*, (May 2006). Accessed on <http://www.christianitytoday.com>.

20 Bailey, “Welcome to the Blogosphere,” 182.

21 Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 80-88.

22 Cf. Bernd Wannenwetsch, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 242-246; Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 281-283.



one of the originators of blog software (Andrew Smales, developer of *Pitas*) worries that increasing penetration of the publicity culture by the blog is tied to its ability to tap into our voyeuristic impulses.<sup>23</sup> The blog turns the Victorian diarist's interest in the inwardness and secrecy of daily quotidian life outward as an expression of the technological rationale of visibility and publicity, hastening the disappearance of voyeurism as an immoral activity. When the consumption of people's everyday lives has become entertainment and surveillance an everyday fact of life, a new humanity is born that no longer aspires after the ideal of a private or hidden life. The public and publicity become all encompassing. Theology done within blog culture all too readily exhibits the lapse into display, preening, and pontification one would expect in a medium where publicity makes one "real," self-exposure promises to up one's visitor count, and one's immediate reactions are assumed to be commentary not only worth reading, but fundamental to the accruing of truth.

A theological assessment of this will to self-publicize needs to ask how, why, and before whom does one wish to appear. In opposition to the politics of publicity, Jesus' criticism and counter-example seem to suggest a rather healthy disregard for what is today called marketing or public relations (Mt. 6:1-6, 27:14, Jn. 5:31).<sup>24</sup> To suggest that what Christians ought to desire is to appear *in* Christian community or *as* community before the world is to raise sharp questions concerning the individualist self-understanding that characterizes the bulk of current blogging culture. This culture of publicity and display of what we already think we possess too often subverts the proper self-forgetfulness of Christian good works, and the technologies of the internet—with their speed and visual base—accelerate this subversion.

The problem of display in blogging culture is intertwined with a high valuation of the *pace* of communication to which the medium lends itself. Whereas one may return countless times to revise a book with the hope that it might be taken hold of by future generations prepared to attend to its unnoticed richness, the blogger has no such aspirations. Pace is paramount and a conversation left untended is "dead" and soon disappears, never to be revisited. Though this is not intrinsically demanded by the medium, the evident emphasis on the living nature of communication and the architectural features of that communication (such as comment boxes) tend strongly toward communication as the rapid exchange of information or opinion. As Alan Jacobs observes, "as vehicles for the development of ideas [blogs] are woefully deficient and will necessarily remain so unless they develop an architecture that is less bound by the demands of urgency—or unless more smart people refuse the dominant architecture."<sup>25</sup> One of George Grant's central themes concerns the tendency of the computer to privilege information over wisdom,<sup>26</sup> and the pace and content of the blogging culture as a whole

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23 Bailey, "Welcome to the Blogosphere," 187.

24 Wannenwetsch, *Political Worship*, 322.

25 Jacobs, "Goodbye, Blog."

26 The modern account of knowledge generates the demand that maths and physics become the foundation-stock of all university disciplines committed to "truth", and

corroborates this perception. This is not a forum that lends itself to sustained, in-depth reflection, but is explicitly one for signaling presence through the offering of opinions. When penetrating writing appears, and it does, it shows clear marks of being from pens trained in slower forums than the blog or chat room. But, as Jacobs also notes, “what happens more often than not...is the conversion of really good scholars into really lousy journalists. With few exceptions, posts at the “academic” or “intellectual” blogs I used to frequent have become the brief and cursory announcement of opinions, not the free explorations of new and dynamic thinking.”<sup>27</sup>

Instantaneous communication pushes communion in the direction of shorter and less substantive interactions which in turn increases our consumption of necessarily more formulaic forms of information. In a previous generation, Thomas Merton attempted to preserve the sensitivities lost to this frantic spirit by reading only old newspapers, out of an awareness that the pace of communication is its most deadening feature,<sup>28</sup> and in this generation many Christian bloggers have also had to develop forms of fasting as a bulwark against the transformation of time by the urgency of blogging.<sup>29</sup> Merton anticipated the reorientation of temporal sensibility of the wired generation who are constantly affectively engaged in maintaining the flow of messages in real time, developing a vastly different notion of reading and attention.<sup>30</sup> The arrangement of hardware and software that sustain the otherwise diverse activities of text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, and so on, are geared to maintaining continual but brief messaging. These technologies

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explains why even disciplines in the humanities, such as the social sciences, aspire to “value free” analyses. Business, industry, and government increasingly need information about the individuals who are within their scope of influence, and sociologists carry out the production of this information. But here what counts as “knowledge” is of immediate and far reaching practical relevance, as Grant often reminded his audiences. “To illustrate: those who make this distinction would say that when I state your principal weighs 150 pounds I am stating a fact; but when I state that he is a noble human being I am simply stating my value preferences. Value is seen as something external to the facts; something which is created by man and not inherent in the world.” George Grant, “Man-Made Man,” in vol.3 of *Collected Works*, ed. Davis and Roper (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 263.

27 Jacobs, “Goodbye, Blog.”

28 “Certainly events happen and they affect me as they do other people. It is important for me to know about them too: but I refrain from trying to know them in their fresh condition as ‘news.’...The news reaches me in the long run through books and magazines, no longer as a stimulant... when you hear news without the ‘need’ to hear it, it treats you differently. And you treat it differently too.” Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 151.

29 L.L. Barkat, “A New Kind of Body: How the Blogosphere is Transforming the Way Christians Connect,” *Today’s Christian* (September/October 2007). Accessed on <http://www.christianitytoday.com>.

30 Rosen, “People of the Screen,” 23-26. Matt Richtel, “Outdoors and Out of Reach, Studying the Brain,” *The New York Times*, August, 16, 2010, <http://www.ny-times.com/2010/08/16/technology/16brain.html?hp>.



increase the number of contacts possible with a greater number of people, and increase abilities to “information forage.” But this is done only by decreasing the content that is communicated or absorbed. A message now communicates more by its form and timing (Hello☺) than its content. *What* one says is deemphasized in relation to the continual maintenance of a sense of collective simultaneity, and more formulaic messages are sufficient for this task. Communication as formulaic stimulus can only be yet another faint echo of the true simultaneity of presence before God in the communion of saints.<sup>31</sup>

#### CHURCH VS. LIFESTYLE ENCLAVES

These questions prepare us to ask: is blogging the forum in which congregants properly discover the gifts God through them brings into the service of the body? The answer to this question is to be found via another: How does this form of communion help or hinder genuine *listening* to one another? How often do we encounter those here who do not conform to our expectations or stock narratives, and how often do those encounters grow into enriching relationships? More importantly, where are our expectations for such a surprising encounter generated and conformed to the work of Christ? Wannenwetsch’s theology suggests that the communication of Christ in the *ecclesia* and through word and sacrament, with its emphasis on the *verbum externum* and the genuine giving and receiving of one’s self in communion, allows us to recognize and name as deficient instances of communication as the mere transfer of information.<sup>32</sup> The forms of speaking, reading, and hearing required in worship—oriented by the desire to listen, reread, digest, and sit under authority and in which we are changed as hearers—are corroded by the expectation that we will hear no more from the other than information. Without a thick theology of listening, and without a place in which listening is practiced and valued, we will have no way to recognize—and therefore to name as temptations—trajectories within internet culture. That culture will have become the shaper of sensibilities that technological humanity will bring to reshape the church’s liturgy.

This emphasis on listening, discernment, and sensible presence suggests that, despite the ubiquity of the blogosphere in which a “church” can form of those anywhere in the world and currently on line, it remains a “lifestyle enclave” and not a real church. In a lifestyle enclave, one leaves when the group activity is no longer interesting, or when interpersonal conflict undermines one’s enjoyment of it. But what is often not left behind is the presupposition that all

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31 This insight was anticipated by Hegel, who called newspaper reading a secular society’s morning prayer. “Early morning newspaper reading is the realists’ form of morning blessing [Morgensegen]. One either orients one’s stance in distinction from the world by reference to God or the way the world is. The newspaper offers a general security about where things stand.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke, Band 5: Schriften und Entwürfe (1799-1808)*, ed. Theodor Ebert (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag 1988), 493. My translation.

32 Bernd Wannenwetsch, “Communication as Transformation,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 13, no.1 (2000): 93-106.

human society is made up of such voluntaristic and utilitarian gatherings. The church universal exists in a fundamentally different register. It is that community in which real conflicts are being overcome in real space and time. The church is that real body gathered with the aim of being conformed to a trans-temporal and spatial community of praise. In this real space, we cannot filter our persona by electronic self-presentation and our choices of congregation are limited by physical geography. A church that emphasizes the *believer's* decision to join or convert will be, for good reason, the church most attracted to and least able to resist the promise of the blogosphere to displace traditional physically gathering church.

#### CHURCHLY AUTHORITY VS. INFORMATION AND OPINION

If the internet is not the appropriate forum for the church's *worship*, might not it be the place where the church's *theology* is properly undertaken? It has lately become a commonplace dogma that internet discussions are freer, more egalitarian, and dynamic. Therefore, they are more interesting than the old forms of communication through traditional media or academic publishing. In this view, the "traditional academic form does not breed conversation, but promotes monologue; it does not foster cross-fertilization of ideas, but reinforces one particular perspective on an issue; it is not open to other voices, but is designed precisely to close them off; and, finally, any such discourse is not welcoming to all voices, but privileges a select group who have been properly vetted by the Western academy."<sup>33</sup> On this basis, some Christians have lately called for a movement of theology out of or at least beyond the academy, primarily into the forum of the internet. Such sentiments express aims quite close to that of Wannenwetsch: conversation, not monologue, cross-fertilization of ideas rather than single perspectives, structural openness to other voices, and no privileging of expertise. As such, these voices have the merit of reminding western theologians how infrequently they imagine themselves doing their work within the acoustic realm of the worshipping community and so become the closed community the bloggers rightly protest. In this, blog theology offers an important corrective to the contemporary construal of academic theology. What we must ask is whether internet theology can in fact generate the community of discernment these authors seek.

In a community of discernment, Wannenwetsch has suggested, authority and judgment are crucial roles sustaining the health of the body. To suggest that theologians have their own appropriate (if circumscribed) authority as church teachers in the body of Christ is by no means to render theology the preserve of experts. To think of theology as an expertise in a body of technical knowledge is to displace theology as a vocation. Theology as a professional qualification, then, is tied to conceptions of management, market orientation, and standards of performance rather than a role within the ecclesia that is bound to be responsive

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33 Myron Bradley Penner and Hunter Barnes, *A New Kind of Conversation: Blogging Toward a Postmodern Faith* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 1.



to it. A vocation finds its form in devotion to the health of the whole community in the concrete form that they appear. Vocational success is judged not according to the criterion of technical efficiency but by its actual effect in the life of the community, bringing it rather closer to an amateur performance.<sup>34</sup> Though it may generate its own type of authorities, blog culture allows neither for local context nor appreciates the value of being “trapped” by a voice that cannot be switched off and so controlled. As a result, it fundamentally narrows the forms of authority that can emerge within it.

Here I confess that, as a theologian, I find these issues crucial because I have regularly seen theological students blog daily—and at a relatively superficial level—to the detriment of the much deeper learning available to them in libraries and seminars. I would never suggest that Christians ought, on principle, to stay aloof from the online community. Central to the account of the church developed here is my affirmation that what it means to be church is to be involved with the world, suffering its missteps precisely in order to be able to name them as missteps. At the same time, it would be a dereliction of my vocation to introduce students to the riches of the communion of saints if I withheld my judgment that, on balance, the effort, habits, and consciousness necessary to be a good citizen of the blog universe competes with the development of habits and forms of attention required to be deeply immersed in a theological tradition. The reading and writing of paragraphs in a blog, however well done, remains a strikingly different activity than reading, digesting, and being changed by a text like Augustine’s *City of God*, or Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*. The sheer difficulty and difference such texts present is theologically important in inviting us to consider whether in fact *we* and *our* forms of communication may be anomalous or even inferior. Furthermore, we are prompted to raise theological questions about why one form might have advantages over another. We cannot prejudge whether or not this is the case, but we will have no grounds from which to make a judgment if we do not learn to listen to the saints as they have presented themselves to us.

#### THE PROMISE OF THEOLOGICAL BLOGGING

It is not yet clear how genuine transformative and reconciling encounter might fruitfully emerge in the blogosphere. An impulse to be more theologically constructive might, however, push us to imagine theological blogging finding an orienting purpose explicitly ancillary to the physical gathering of the worshipping community and disavowing any desire to displace it. It thus far has not surmounted the cultural and technical undertows to become a forum for the sustained and patient attention like that of academic writing, reading, and reviewing books. Nor has it demonstrated the growth in affection that transcends (but doesn’t erase)

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34 Bernd Wannenwetsch, “Der Profi: Mensch ohne Eigenschaften: Warum die Kirche Amateure braucht,” in *Alles ist Nichts: Evangelium Hören II*, ed. Arbeitskreis Kirche in der Marketgesellschaft (Nürnberg, 2001), 45-55.

cultural difference in the midst of theological disputes that take place in person.<sup>35</sup> When it has done so, it submits to forms of stage managing, intensifying the communicative potential that has developed over time in other forums such as the symposium, journal, or book format.

To blog as a way of writing a book, to take one example, substantially changes blog conversations. The form and gravitas of the culture of print publishing immediately influences the content of the blog, generating, for instance, much more substantive and careful interactions between a group that is necessarily limited to hand-picked conversational partners aware their writing will be edited to freeze the best moments of the discussion for publication.<sup>36</sup> The internet is a public forum, and one primarily suited to the thoughtful passing on of knowledge, which differs from publicity by being a gift to others rather than a mode of self-aggrandizement. In it, the goings-on of the world can be observed and brought to the church's attention and the things of the church can be disseminated and digested. But for the reasons discussed, it ought not be expected to become the primary locus of the church's theological thinking nor to displace the church's gathering for worship or its ordained authorities.

Theological blogsites at their best show evidence of awareness of these pitfalls and their primary location within the physical and local church. Such sites fill an intermediate niche in the church's pedagogical and dialogical tasks. If pursued seriously and prayerfully they may produce writing both more intellectual and responsible than much Christian populist publishing. They could also be more accessible—both physically and in terms of presentation—than the extended ecclesial discussion taking place in academic journals. They also invite academic theologians—who too often guilty of hoarding their insights under the influence of ideologies of individual academic reputation, intellectual property, profit, or career advancement—to consider a new liberality in sharing their theological insights and writing. Theirs is thus a freeing word to academic theologians in witnessing that whatever is of value in their work is a gift of the Spirit that it is dangerous to hoard. As such, they can provide salutary counterbalance to the undertows of “bookish” theology whose medium and institutional location allow it all too easily to drift free of its allegiance to the church as, in essence, another form of praising the name of the Lord.

Bloggers may participate in their own way in the church finding its mind through the discussions that introduce, disseminate, fact check, and hold theologians to their vocation of patient and serious thought. In this way they might call for the highest standard of communication even as they validate the indispensability and centrality of more permanent and accountable mediums and authorities. In this action, they too may serve the gentle unifying power of the

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35 These considerations also suggest why on-line seminary is a deficient mode of theological education. See Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 150-153.

36 This effect is evident and admitted by Penner and Barnes in *A New Kind of Conversation*, though without any recognition of what this admission suggests about the assumptions that frame the project as a whole.



Spirit. As we see in secular spheres, blogging cannot displace the mainstream media outlets that sign, date, and stand behind the accuracy of their every word, not as opinion but as truth with a concrete address.<sup>37</sup> But bloggers, insofar as they are attentive to texts and real-world details, can call these official actors to a higher standard, while simultaneously validating the greater responsibility and authority to which they, and not bloggers, are held.<sup>38</sup> Even those media corporations who are increasingly shifting their emphasis to on-line publishing in order to absorb some of the immediacy and ease of access of on-line culture are developing protocols for ensuring the quality and accuracy of their material. In so doing they ensure that some form of elite gatekeeper role will remain.<sup>39</sup> Discernment and moral ownership cannot be eradicated from trustworthy communication.

It is exceedingly difficult to simultaneously inhabit the cultures of instantaneous opinion and official and laboriously factchecked writing. I am suggesting both that the cultural undertow among bloggers is very strong toward communication as opinion-statement or display, and that any hope of combating this undertow will be derived from a transformation of this culture by submerging it in the praise discourse that necessarily orients the truth discourse of the worshipping community.<sup>40</sup> When this transfer of allegiance takes place, the internet may no longer appear as the most suitable forum for many ecclesial activities such as worship, education, pastoral care, and so on. That the task of pastoral care is already migrating into the blogosphere as the blog becomes an ersatz confessional or pastoral forum<sup>41</sup> is a stark reminder to the local church of the critical nature of its responsibility for discernment. It is also a standing indictment of its not having been perceived as peopled with interested enough listeners who invite all into the body. The power of the new communication technologies to create an idolatrous sense of simultaneous collectivity will only gain momentum amidst a western church that has lost any sense of the true simultaneity of the communion of saints.

Extract from chapter 6 of, Brian Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

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37 I do not mean to suggest that influence is not being exerted in the opposite direction, but to indicate that the gravitas and depth built up over centuries in the culture of books appeals to bloggers, who aspire to it while doing away with its technical forms. Cf. Motoko Rich, "You've Read the Headlines. Now, Quick, Read the Book," *New York Times*, March 30 2009.

38 Bailey, "Welcome to the Blogosphere," 180.

39 Eric Alterman, "Out of Print: The Death and Life of the American Newspaper," in *The New Yorker*, March 31, 2008.

40 Wannenwetsch, "Singen und Sagen," 331.

41 Bailey, "Welcome to the Blogosphere," 183-184.

# BOOK REVIEWS

Bruno Forte, *The Portal of Beauty: Towards a Theology of Aesthetics*, transl. by David Glenday and Paul McPartlan, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008, pp. 121. \$30 (paperback).

Given widespread confusion in the church about anything related to aesthetics, and given also the earnest desire many Christians have today to understand and to experience more of beauty in both worship and in everyday life, a short primer covering some possible ways to understand the relation between truth and beauty seems like a timely idea.

Bruno Forte's aim in this volume is indeed to draw together a number of specifically theological resources for thinking more deeply about beauty. In the first part of the book various figures from the tradition—Augustine, Aquinas, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Balthasar, and Evdokimov—are each given a chapter, wherein their respective contributions are briefly outlined and explored.

The common thread running through these discussions is the author's view of beauty as a revelatory event in which the whole manifests itself in the fragment. This theory seems well-suited to an aesthetic reading of the incarnation—Forte makes much of the notion of Jesus Christ as the *Verbum abbreviatum*—and has the added benefit of being able to incorporate a good deal of what the older writers had to say about the supposed hallmarks of beauty (e.g., Thomas's illuminating discussion of *integritas*, *proportio*, and *claritas*).

In the second, more constructive part of the book, the author looks at two areas of contemporary culture where the phenomenon of beauty might be expected, or at least hoped, to manifest itself: sacred music and modern cinema. The book then concludes with a brief theological meditation on some surprising points of overlap between Christian thinking about beauty and about death.

All of this is surely well thought-out, and yet *The Portal of Beauty* nevertheless comes as an acute disappointment, leaving this reviewer with a distinct sense of unease.

This feeling derives not, I think, from semantic difficulties (although it is troubling that the theologians represented here are all assumed to be talking more or less about the same thing—as if the meaning of key terms such as 'beauty' and 'revelation' were unequivocal and uncontested). Nor does the problem stem from my anxiety over whether the author has interpreted his chosen writers—Kierkegaard especially—with sufficient subtlety and care. Often, as with his nuanced discussion of analogy, Forte shows great learning and insight.

The defect lies instead in the author's strangely disincarnate prose style—a sort of theological *patois*, that threatens constantly to whisk the reader away from honest argument into a realm of ungrounded abstraction. Indeed, it is tempting to conclude that beauty is uniquely susceptible to the danger of needless theorizing.



In this light consider the form and the content of Forte's claim that, "*Beauty is 'ecstatic': it can only be attained by those disposed to lose themselves, ready to be led beyond themselves towards the other in a love which impels them beyond every thing, beyond being, beyond even the divine and the good, when these are understood outside of a total exodus from self and from every possession of self*" (14).

Beauty, in other words, is a high-stakes poker game. It should not surprise us, then, if the ante is too high for most Christians to get in. Unfortunately, this also seems to be the lesson to be gleaned from Forte's paraphrase of Kierkegaard:

Beauty is the royal road to defeat; beauty is despairing, precious, terrible, and seductive! A Christianity deprived of beauty would risk being nothing other than a faith that has never known the darkness of despair, and so being an empty, tranquilizing, "established Christianity." On the other hand, though, beauty has its price: no one can pass through the fire and not risk being burned. Only those who have accepted this risk and have stood firm in it can hope to accomplish the deeds of a "knight of faith": without a passion for beauty not even Abraham could have loved Isaac and been prepared to offer him in sacrifice on the holy mountain. True sacrifice requires love, and we only truly love a beauty that has stolen us from ourselves. (29)

Such prose clearly aims to transcend itself, to become poetic, to transport the reader; and there is no reason to doubt that it will often succeed in doing so. Yet even if the reading of *Fear and Trembling* implied here is, as I believe, spectacularly wrong, it is (again) the distancing dialect in which these claims are advanced, and not just the exegesis, that gives cause for alarm. Examples of such rose-colored writing could be pulled from every chapter, indeed from almost every page of *The Portal of Beauty*. What are the likely effects of such a relentlessly glossy style?

Tentatively, I want to suggest that such language ironically and cumulatively ends up placing beauty outside the bounds of normal Christian experience. For except perhaps when they are worshipping with the help of some especially ancient or refulgent bit of tradition, normal Christians do not wax on rhapsodically about beauty's supposed powers. They do not preoccupy themselves with irruptions of the "Taboric light." And they certainly do not talk in terms of what unfortunately have become the stock categories of aesthetic theology (Mystery, Paradox, Transcendence, etc.).

Normal Christian talk has to do first and foremost with the person and work of Jesus, and with the shape of living that seeks obedience to his call. Shouldn't it be possible to write simply about beauty, in words that any Christian could hear and understand?

In his own way Hans Urs Von Balthasar acknowledges this priority when he writes that, "we ought never to speak of God's beauty without reference to the form and manner of appearing which he exhibits in salvation-history" (*Seeing the Form*, 124, cited by Forte on 62). Of course, it is one thing to suggest that

christology should discipline all theological reflection about beauty, and quite another to abide contentedly within that frame.

I fear, then, that despite this book's apparent goal of helping to foster a recovery of the aesthetic dimensions of faith, the actual language the author employs will undermine this worthy project. Beauty, wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins, "*does this: keeps warm / Men's wits to the things that are*". If this is true, then we need to find better words with which to talk about beauty and move towards a theology of aesthetics.

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Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of Early Christians*, New York: T&T Clark, 2009, pp. xii + 239. \$29.95 (paperback)

Philip Harland's *Dynamics of Identity* is a unique study of Jewish and Christian identity in the world of early Christians. Utilizing archeological inscriptions and social sciences, the author argues that Judean (Jewish) gatherings and Christian congregations are best understood when placed in the context of Greco-Roman associations. These associations were "small, unofficial ('private') groups, usually consisting of about ten to fifty members . . . that met together on a regular basis to socialize with one another and to honor both earthly and divine benefactors, which entailed a variety of internal and external activities" (26). Most scholars, he points out, do not categorize Judean and Christian groups with these associations; they categorize them as sects dissimilar to these groups. The purpose of his text is to show that they should, in fact, be categorized as associations.

Harland divides the book into four parts, each of which give a unique perspective on Judean and Christian identity. In Part One, he details the basic argument: "Despite their position as cultural minority groups, synagogues and congregations should not be studied in isolation from analogous social structures of that world" (25). Archeology shows that they were viewed and functioned as associations (45).

Part Two emphasizes the importance of internal language as the primary way in which a group constructs identity (63). Examples show that both Judean and Christian groups utilized fictive kinship language to address one another (e.g., "brother," "mother," and "father"). Harland makes the case that while scholars, such as Wayne Meeks, doubt the widespread and common use of this type of language in the Greek world, epigraphic evidence, which is often neglected in this type of analysis, provides a more complete understanding of group identity. He gives clear examples that some unofficial associations, Christian congregations, and Judean gatherings used familial language; therefore, the internal language of Christians and Judeans was not unique in the Greco-Roman social context.



In the third Part, Harland claims that Judean gatherings should not be studied in isolation from other minority ethnic groups but alongside of them (99). He conducts a case study of an ancient Syrian group in the eastern Mediterranean in order to show that these minority groups were not detached from their local contexts; instead, they assimilated to and interacted with their surrounding culture (105-122). He suggests that Judean groups assimilated to and interacted with their culture in a similar way.

Part Four focuses on language of rivalry and accusation as it pertains to identity. In regard to rivalry, benefaction became a source of tension between groups—one group would view another as socially superior who had a more honorable benefactor (148-153). In regard to accusations, Judeans and Christians used negative social categorizations and were also negatively categorized (176-178). Negative labels formed their identity whether used *by* them or *against* them. Harland's purpose in this section is the same as in the rest of the book—to show that Judean and Christian groups were similar to other associations.

The author's unique contribution to the field of socio-historical studies is two-fold. Methodologically, he interprets non-literary sources through the perspective of social sciences in order to examine identity and migration theories. Paradigmatically, he portrays Jewish and Christian groups as one of many unofficial associations, not sectarian. This methodology and paradigm, together, provides a unique voice into the growing conversation between social-historians for Christian studies.

This book moves the current discussion towards a more balanced approach and paradigm. Harland is emphatic that scholars and readers alike should pay attention to literary sources *as well as* epigraphic evidence. The type of further study that may come from Harland's work will likely be methodological rather than paradigmatic. One specific area for further study will be applying his methodology towards immigrant studies of the ancient world, which is relatively untouched (122).

This work is strong in at least two areas. First, it utilizes neglected primary sources for Christian studies. Second, it addresses the importance of time and place for social-history. The author accomplishes his overall purpose to resituate the discussion about Judean and Christian groups by drawing attention to their ancient milieu in association life.

While Harland accomplishes his goal, his arguments are not always clear. His presentation style is often moot and his analysis of data sometimes inconclusive. He draws similarities between groups but fails to explicitly articulate how these similarities influenced Jewish and Christian identity. His major assessment was preliminary and left the reader wanting more. However, I recommend this book to those who have not been exposed to the value of epigraphic evidence for social-historical Christian studies or those who have a purely sectarian view of Judean and Christian groups in the world of early Christians.

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James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009, pp. 238. \$21.99 (Paperback)

James K. A. Smith primarily addresses his approachable and compelling book, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, to those in Christian higher education, but he achieves a work that deserves a wider readership, especially among clergy and laity. In this book, the first of three volumes, Smith sets out to question the prevailing fascination in Christian higher education with worldview building. He encourages Christian educators to re-imagine the Christian university as a place where a unique people are formed through worship, rather than merely informed. Smith's modest goal leads him on a fascinating and important journey from questions of philosophical anthropology and teleology to cultural exegesis and liturgical reflection.

In Part One, Smith frames his critique of Christian higher education's emphasis on worldview building. In Chapter One, he points out that Christian educational theory assumes a particular philosophical anthropology that understands human persons as primarily cognitive beings. The university's obsession with the exchange of ideas reflects this assumption (39-40). Drawing deeply on Augustine, Smith argues that, rather than being primarily cognitive beings, humans are "liturgical animals," (40) who are more preoccupied with desiring what they love than reflecting on what they believe. Moreover, a person's desire (love) is naturally teleological, and pointed toward a particular end (52-55). The end toward which one's love aims is dependent on one's habits, which are "the *fulcrum* of our desire" (56). These habits form us through practices that shape and direct our love. So practices mold a person's very core because "practices 'carry' the *telos* in them" (62).

In Chapter Two, Smith suggests that the church, particularly the Protestant tradition, mistakenly prefers cognitive appeals, while cultural institutions like the market cleverly produce a more fundamental appeal to the heart (76). One must understand what a person loves, and why, to understand them. Practices form habits that automate a person's desire, argues Smith (80-81). So he observes that practices can be "thick" or "thin" according to their formative power (82). Smith defines the "thickest" practices as liturgies because they shape our core love and the ultimate end we desire (87-88). Chapter Three develops this point by illuminating how consumerist practices, championed by the "mall," constitute a secular liturgy, which demands our love and calls us to a particular form of worship (96-101). Likewise, nationalism seeks our utmost devotion and our love through its own liturgies (e.g. the pledge of allegiance). Smith suggests that the power of the mall's liturgical practices and those of the nation might explain how a student's experience outside of the classroom can be more influential than the information they learn inside (117).

In Part Two of the book, Smith explores the formative power of Christian worship. He contends in Chapter Four that worship precedes worldview, pointing out that the church worshiped before "they got all their doctrines in order" (135). Christian worship is a material affair, which appeals to the more



fundamental desiring nature of the human person; thus, worship is embedded in the material world through ancient liturgies and sacraments that offer “counter-formations to the liturgies of the mall, the stadium, and the frat house” (153). Chapter Five explores what Smith describes as the “social imaginary” or “vision of the kingdom” inherent within Christian worship (155). The various elements of Christian worship, like prayer, confession, baptism, and recitation of the creed, rightly direct the worshiper’s love toward the kingdom and are a form of “practicing (for) the kingdom” (205). Smith concludes that the counter-formation of Christian worship must extend past Sunday morning worship into the week if it is to have a fighting chance against the secular liturgies of the market. He suggests monastic practice such as daily prayer might continue the liturgical formation of Sunday morning (208-214). Having laid the groundwork for understanding the human person and the formative power of worship, Smith concludes in Chapter Six with encouragement for those in Christian higher education to re-imagine the relationship between worship and learning, the church and the university. The Christian university, Smith argues, must be an “‘ecclesial’ university” and be “reconnected to the thick practices of the church” (220-221).

I have only minor quibbles with this book. The first chapter is dense and repetitive, though admirably accessible. The feeling of repetition eases in later chapters, but occasionally rears its head in frequent summaries. Smith may overstate his argument regarding the primacy of the heart over the head. In his zeal to counter the overemphasis within the university and the church of a Gnostic mind/body dualism, Smith seems to short change human cognition. He makes a strong case for the power of liturgy to form a person’s desire, but does not sufficiently address the question of how liturgies are intentionally constructed or adopted. Yes, liturgy is formative, but the operation of the mind and belief are often necessary for making ethical decisions regarding how one wants to be formed (e.g. deciding to stand in the long line at the grocery store to develop the virtue of patience). Smith does assert toward the end of the book that understanding how cultural liturgies are formative can lead to a “limited deactivation” because “their affective power thrives on bypassing our critical discernment” (208-209). Smith goes on to affirm our “critical intellectual capacit[y],” but this claim deserves more attention (209). Perhaps, forthcoming volumes will provide opportunity to further explore the nuances of interaction between belief and desire.

Smith’s “core claim” that liturgies, both cultural and religious, “shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world” is well made and well received (25). Although Smith concentrates on drawing application for Christian higher education, his Augustinian philosophical anthropology, insightful critique of cultural liturgies, and compelling account of Christian liturgical worship, result in nothing less than a book written for the church. The people of the church, pastors, theologians, and laypeople who read this book might easily hear Smith speaking directly to them.

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